

2022

## Strategies Small-and Medium-Sized Enterprise Leaders Use for Sustainability Beyond 5 Years in Rivers State

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Olawe Alaba Tula

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Strategies Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprise Leaders Use for Sustainability

Beyond 5 Years in Rivers State

by

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MBA, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, 2007

PGD, Federal University of Technology Owerri, 2000

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

October 2022

## Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) leaders lacking sustainability strategies experience high rates of business failure through loss of profit. A high rate of SME failure is linked to a lack of competitive advantage, resulting in decreased productivity and profitability. Grounded in resource-based view theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that three SME leaders in Rivers State used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and company documents, including employee handbooks and annual reports. The three themes that emerged through thematic analysis were strategic management, stakeholder management strategies, and strategic business processes. A key recommendation for SME leaders is to use proven strategies that retain employees, streamline operational practices, and increase organizational performance, which may lead to economic and community development. The implications for positive social change include the potential to generate more employment opportunities and improve living standards in communities.

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## Dedication

God has blessed me exceedingly and abundantly with His grace and mercy! I have reached the pinnacle of my academic career. I am sharing and dedicating this doctoral study to my late father, Josiah Okuta Tula. Dad, you inspired me to partake in this endeavor. You encouraged me to be the best and accept challenges beyond my comfort zone. It saddens me that you are not here to celebrate a tremendous milestone, but I thank you for all your support. Dad, I love and miss you. I dedicate this study to my children, Emmanuella and Olivia Tula, to guide your life successes. Completing this doctoral study is a testament to your father's dedication and perseverance. The road to completion was difficult, but your prayers, love, patience, and support invigorated me to remain focused. I love you both unconditionally. To my wife, Stella Oghenegueke Tula, you are the best, and I will always love and cherish you for praying and supporting me to this threshold. My siblings, work colleagues, and friends, you have been the best cheerleaders throughout this process and unfailing reminders of why I am doing this. I love you all.

## Acknowledgments

I acknowledge God for the strength and wisdom to complete this doctoral journey. I could not have achieved this milestone without God and prayers. I want to thank my wife, Stella Oghenegueke Tula, and my children, Emmanuella and Olivia Tula, for their support and encouragement. My colleagues at work, Christopher Jeremiah Abimiku, Dr. Chukwuemeka Omeoga, and Dr. Samuel Ekong, encouraged me to finish this study. My friends for their continued support and motivation as I advanced in my academic career. Thank you to my doctoral committee for their support, guidance, and encouragement. To my doctoral chair, Dr. Gwendolyn Dooley, I am highly grateful for the opportunity to have you as my chair. Your persistence and authentic guidance encouraged me to complete the most challenging academic feat; the memories are perennial. You fostered a teaching environment for all your students to learn and understand. To Team Dooley, I could not have completed this study without your help. The late-night phone calls and Zoom sessions motivated me to complete my study within my desired timeline. Thank you for the feedback and for sharing your doctoral experiences to enhance my understanding of the process and learn some best practices. Thank you for being the sounding board to bounce off my ideas. Thank you, Dr. Janet Booker, my second committee member, for your valuable feedback. Thank you, Dr. Brenda Jack, my university research reviewer (URR), for taking the time to review my work to improve the quality of my work. A final thank you to the participants for your participation in my research.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) leaders contribute to developing and developed countries' poverty reduction and economic development. SME businesses catalyze any nation's economic growth and development (Bello et al., 2018; Lawal et al., 2020; Osim Etim et al., 2020). However, sustainability is the main challenge confronting SME leaders, who may find it difficult to operate their businesses beyond 5 years (Gumel, 2019; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020). SMEs' sustainability indicators include annual sales, revenues, growth, and employment (Meher & Ajibie, 2018). In Nigeria, SME leaders experience challenges such as infrastructural deficiency, financial sourcing, lack of training, and lack of a workable policy or framework to drive SME sustainability (Nwokocha et al., 2019). Such issues render the sustainability of SMEs in Nigeria difficult.

### **Background of the Problem**

SMEs contribute to the Nigerian economy through job creation, employment opportunities, and gross domestic product (GDP) increase. However, despite SMEs' economic benefits, many leaders lack sustainability strategies to operate their businesses beyond 5 years (Ibeme, 2020; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020). Most SME leaders do not consider the impact of leadership on organizational performance and sustainability (Ibrahim & Daniel, 2019; Samson & Ilesanmi, 2019). Leadership, management decisions, a volatile business environment, lack of finance, electricity, insecurity, and multiple taxation jeopardize SMEs' growth and sustainability in Nigeria.

Researchers have identified factors that affect SME sustainability as internal and external factors. Internal factors are how management preference and company attributes influence issues or expansion decisions (Hanggraeni et al., 2019). One critical internal factor for SMEs' success is employees and leaders (Ibeme, 2020). Internal factors affecting SME performance are high employee turnover, low employee motivation, low employee engagement, and low innovation and growth (Ajibola, 2020; Ibeme, 2020). The internal factors' impact is controllable within the SME establishment to achieve sustainability.

Various researchers have conducted studies on the sustainability of SMEs with a focus on external factors. External factors affecting SME sustainability include lack of funding, multiple taxes, inadequate electricity, community relationships, and customer perception (Osime Etim et al., 2020; Peter et al., 2018; Saidi et al., 2019). However, there is limited research on SME sustainability strategies in Nigeria. Therefore, I explored how SME leaders in Nigeria use sustainability strategies focusing on internal and external organizational factors to sustain their businesses. Knowledge of these strategies could help SME leaders maintain their businesses beyond 5 years.

### **Problem Statement**

SME leaders in the 21st century have the challenge of leading effectively (Howard et al., 2019). There are 73,081 SMEs in Nigeria, and 80–85% fail before 5 years in operation (Asikhia & Naidoo, 2020). The general business problem was that most SME leaders lack the necessary leadership experience to achieve sustainability. The

specific business problem was that some SME leaders in Nigeria lack sustainability strategies to remain in business beyond 5 years.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the sustainability strategies that SME leaders use to remain in business beyond 5 years. The sample consisted of three SME leaders in Rivers State, Nigeria, who continued in business beyond 5 years. The study may contribute to social change by providing information on successful strategies that could reduce business closure, stimulate the economy, boost job creation, reduce unemployment, and reduce crime.

### **Nature of the Study**

Researchers use three research methods for studies: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed (Sykes et al., 2018). Quantitative research involves working with statistics, variables, or numbers that allow researchers to quantify the world (Stockemer, 2019). The quantitative method would not have provided an opportunity to thoroughly understand common themes from participants disclosing the “how” and “why” behind running a successful small business (Stockemer, 2019). A quantitative method was inappropriate for understanding SME leaders' sustainability strategies to remain operational beyond 5 years because there were no variables to examine or compare regarding the chosen research topic.

Mixed methods were not appropriate because this study had no quantitative elements. Researchers use qualitative approaches to understand context, explore new

phenomena, identify further research questions, and uncover new change models (Kegler et al., 2019). Queirós et al. (2017) stated that a qualitative research method is concerned with aspects of reality that cannot be quantified, focusing on understanding and explaining the dynamics of social relations. The qualitative approach was appropriate to explore the descriptive strategies used to keep SME businesses operational beyond 5 years.

There are multiple qualitative research designs, which include (a) phenomenology, (b) case study, (c) ethnography, and (d) narrative. A phenomenological design was not appropriate because I was not studying the individual worldviews of many individuals (Mohajan, 2018). The ethnographic method was not suitable because I was not seeking to look at cultural influences related to the topic (Stefaniak & McDonald, 2022). A narrative design was inappropriate because I was not seeking to tell the life stories of the businesses participating in the study (Mohajan, 2018). The phenomenological, ethnographic, and narrative designs were inappropriate for this study because these methods do not allow a researcher to ask “why” and “how” questions.

The case study design was appropriate for this research study because it allowed me to ask “how” and “why” questions focused on events I had little to no control over (Mohajan, 2018). The case study research design provided an opportunity to gain in-depth information from business leaders who had operated a sustainable small business past 5 years. Mohajan (2018) described a case study design as a single case or a multiple



case study. A multiple case study was appropriate for this study to help produce robust data to provide independent analytical conclusions across issues.

### **Research Question**

What sustainability strategies do SME leaders use to remain in business beyond 5 years?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What successful sustainability strategies did you use to establish and operate the business beyond 5 years?
2. What sustainability strategy did you implement to achieve sustainable growth and remained in business beyond 5 years?
3. What sustainability strategy did you implement to overcome critical challenges to remain in business beyond 5 years?
4. What sustainability strategy did you use to sustain profitability and remained in business beyond 5 years?
5. What sustainability strategy did you use to sustain staff recruitment and retention to remain in business beyond 5 years?
6. What sustainability strategies did you implement to achieve peace and business continuity with host communities to remain in business beyond 5 years?
7. What sustainability strategies did you use to sustain employee innovation and motivation to remain in business beyond 5 years?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The resource-based view (RBV) theory developed by Wernerfelt in 1984 was the conceptual framework for this study. Wernerfelt (1984) developed the RBV from the work of Penrose (1959). Penrose (1959) suggested that the resources of a firm influence growth and act as constraints to increase if the resources are inadequate. Wernerfelt (1984) used the RBV to show how leaders could seamlessly harness a firm's resources for profitability. Hameed et al. (2021a) suggested that resources are strengths or weaknesses, tangible or intangible assets linked with firms' efforts to achieve continuous competitive advantage, improved growth, and profitability. Firms' resources are a combination of facilities that develop value-creation strategies. These resources include the firm's assets, capabilities, processes, knowledge information, and attributes (Hameed et al., 2021a; Ujwary-Gil & Potoczek, 2020). RBV theory describes how SME leaders achieve business sustainability, reflecting long-term strategies and the uniqueness of resources that advance SMEs' long-term survival.

## **Operational Definitions**

*Business sustainability*: Lozano et al. (2015) defined business sustainability as the triple bottom line of balancing environmental impact, social fairness, and economic value over time.

*Organizational performance*: Organizational performance comprises the results of an organization or the actual outputs, measured against intended outcomes, goals, and objectives (Al Khajeh, 2018).

*Organizational resources:* Barney (1991) defined organizational resources as assets, capabilities, processes, corporate attributes, information, and knowledge under the firm's ownership and control that are capable of enabling the firm to develop and implement strategies to enhance performance.

*Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs):* In this study, an SME was defined as a business organization with between 10 and 199 employees and a capital base of 5–500 million naira or 1.2 million U.S. dollars (Small & Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria [SMEDAN] & National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2017).

*VRIN resources:* Unique resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable can help a firm achieve a sustainable competitive advantage over rivals (Barney, 1991).

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are things that are somewhat out of a researcher's control, but if they disappear, a study will become irrelevant (Simon, 2011). Researchers perceive that a study's assumptions are valid yet lack authentic evidence that this is the case (Ellis & Levy, 2009). I assumed that a qualitative research method and case study research design were appropriate to explore the sustainability strategies used by SME leaders in Nigeria to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Further, I assumed that the participants answered the interview questions fairly and honestly. I also thought that the selected participants knew about the topic under investigation. I assumed that the participants

represented the population of SME owners in Rivers State, Nigeria. Last, I thought that the interview questions were related to the study and allowed me to gather enough information for data saturation.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of a study are factors or variables that a researcher does not have power over (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). A researcher needs to identify such limitations (Yin, 2018). One of this study's limitations was its restriction to Rivers State, Nigeria; therefore, it cannot be generalized to the entire country.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations define a study's scope and boundaries, enabling the researcher to maintain control over the study (Oyarzún et al., 2021). Delimitations are, in essence, the limitations consciously set by the researcher (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). They are concerned with the researcher's definitions as to the boundaries or limits of their work so that the study's aims and objectives do not become impossible to achieve (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The main delimitations of this study included the sample size, population, and geographical location of Rivers State in southern Nigeria. Due to anticipated resource constraints (time and finance) in using a single case study, I used a multiple case study focusing on interviewing participants about sustainability strategies used by small businesses that had sustained growth and profitability over 5 years. The last delimitation was that I only interviewed small business leaders who had successfully developed and used strategies to operate their business successfully and sustainably for

over 5 years, as well as who had demonstrated that they could articulate or explain their successful strategies coherently to enable the reader and the researcher to understand the scope and the implications.

### **Significance of the Study**

Leaders who implement sustainability strategies may remain in business beyond 5 years. Ade et al. (2020) and Asikhia and Naidoo (2020) asserted that SMEs' failure rate in Nigeria was about 80–85% within the first 5 years from inception. SMEs' sustainability beyond 5 years could enable existing employees to retain their jobs and create more jobs, thereby reducing unemployment and improving people's living standards in Nigeria. The strategies shared by participants and the study's findings may also increase business profitability and enhance the sustainability of new and existing SMEs beyond 5 years. Leaders developing and deploying sustainability strategies may create long-term value for key SME stakeholders.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Sustainability strategies focus on businesses' economic, social, and environmental development. Organizations operate sustainably to benefit stakeholders, employees, shareholders, customers, governments, and communities (Dhanda & Shrotryia, 2020; Matzembacher & Meira, 2019). For SMEs, knowledge of sustainable strategies benefits stakeholders and could enhance the sustainability of the business beyond 5 years (Quartey & Oguntoye, 2020). SMEs' sustainability strategies beyond 5 years lead to job

creation, financial security, the general well-being of the populace, and the economic development of Nigeria.

SME leaders may use sustainability strategies beyond 5 years to formulate successful business strategies. SME sustainability strategies could support businesses' long-term growth and value creation (Prasada et al., 2021). Knowledge of sustainable strategy may enable an organization's leaders to promote employment, enhance productivity, protect their environment, and encourage customer loyalty toward increasing profitability.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Business failure impacts all segments of the economy. People lose income when businesses fail, invariably creating family upheaval. SME sustainability leads to an improved local economy because SMEs contribute to the community's growth and development, leading to positive social change. Positive social change results from actions taken to improve the lives of community members where the business operates (Lumpkin et al., 2018). A sustainable SME is an environmentally friendly business showing concern and recognition for the community where it operates (Dhanda & Shrotryia, 2020; Montiel et al., 2020). SME sustainability enables businesses to contribute to community socioeconomic well-being through corporate social responsibility and environmental friendliness known as net zero. Identifying the factors that ensure the sustainability of small businesses may provide information to help small

business leaders use the model created to improve their performance and reduce the risk of failure.

SME business leaders are involved in sole proprietorship or partnership in one form of retail or wholesale services. Improving sales in a retail business leads to more profit, which might expand the company to create more outlets and job opportunities or employment for the community (Sarker & Ashrafi, 2018). Additional benefits from SME sustainability include better living standards and quality of life for SME employees. Employees and SME leaders could spend their increased income within the local community, resulting in other businesses benefiting from their services and creating a positive multiplier effect. SME sustainability leads to improved marketing and customer services, trading with other companies, and timely payment of taxes (Hu & Kee, 2022). Furthermore, identifying the successful strategies for small business sustainability could benefit every country segment.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

I reviewed the literature to examine the work of other researchers related to SMEs, the RBV theory, and sustainability strategy. The literature review includes articles from peer-reviewed researchers on various aspects of SMEs, RBV theory related to sustainability, and the impacts of SME sustainability. The literature is also relevant to new entrants and existing SMEs that have been in operation and affect people, society, the environment, and the economy, and the challenges of managing SMEs and SME failures or successes.

For this study, RBV theory was the conceptual framework. I used RBV theory to explore the sustainability strategies that SME leaders used to operate beyond 5 years in Rivers State, Nigeria. RBV theory addresses how resources help a company and impact the success and growth of any business organization (Gueler & Schneider, 2021; Shibin et al., 2020). This literature review also provides information on how RBV theory relates to SME success and sustainability. A thorough review of literature enabled me to review the works of other researchers in the field of study and avoid repeating what other researchers had done. To review the literature, I searched for research on the sustainability or success of SMEs in Nigeria and other countries that covered leadership, challenges, impacts, failure, success, and sustainability. The literature review involved researching articles to gain an in-depth knowledge of SMEs, their leaders, and the RBV theory that I used as the study's conceptual framework.

The studies I chose were the work of researchers in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The sources for the literature review included peer-reviewed journals, two government websites, and dissertations. Among the articles reviewed, 90% were published within 5 years of my anticipated graduation. I used Emerald Management Journals, ABI-INFORM Complete, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, Directory of Open Access Journals, government databases (e.g., SMEDAN) in Nigeria, and Google Scholar. The database search included the terms RBV theory, dynamic capability, organizational performance, entrepreneurship, entrepreneur, entrepreneurial orientation, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), SME leaders, leadership, growth, finance,



challenges, the impact of SMEs on the economy, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability.

### **Resource-Based View Theory**

The conceptual theory selected for this multiple case study was RBV theory. Penrose (1959) presented groundbreaking work on firms' RBV as a collection of bundled resources deployed to yield valuable services to the organization. Researchers have applied RBV theory to analyze the collection of resources and capabilities to achieve competitive advantage for organizational growth, performance, and profitability (Barney, 1991, 2001; Penrose, 1959; Peteraf, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984). Researchers adopting the RBV examine companies' internal resources, abilities, and relationship with strategic decision making (Chen et al., 2021a; Putra et al., 2021). Hameed et al. (2021a) posited that RBV theory describes firms' resources affecting external competitiveness to determine valued outcomes. Although some researchers have criticized the theory, RBV theory allows researchers to consider the pool of resources used to achieve competitive advantage through strategic decision making for performance and growth.

RBV theory has strengths and weaknesses in addressing tangible or intangible assets linked with the firm to achieve sustained competitive advantage to improve growth and profitability. Fazal et al. (2021) and Jancenelle (2021) considered an enterprise a resource portfolio for tangible and intangible resources (e.g., physical assets, human resources, and innovation). RBV theory reveals that stretched resources are tangible and intangible, such as a firm's financial, physical, intellectual property, organizational, and

reputational management (Chen et al., 2021a; Ghilavi et al., 2021). Hossain et al. (2021) and Elia et al. (2021) suggested that resources are valuable, rare, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable (VRIN). Heterogeneous resources and VRIN resources yield sustained competitive advantage and profitability (Chen et al., 2021a; Elia et al., 2021). Different tangible and intangible resources affect a company's competitive advantage directly or indirectly toward profitability.

Though the RBV is somewhat prevalent in strategy and operations management studies, some scholars have criticized its usefulness in developing a sound business strategy. Danish (2018) raised a definitional problem in determining whether a resource is valuable when it is nontradeable and the market cannot value it. Bromiley and Rau (2016) argued about the justification given by RBV proponents for the assertion that VRIN resources help firms achieve and sustain competitive advantage. Because only a few firms have secured sustainable competitive advantage using VRIN resources, researchers have criticized the RBV approach, leading to further work and research for a holistic approach to strategy formation and other schools of thought.

Bromiley and Rau (2016) further contended that the RBV is unsuitable for operations management because measuring sustained competitive advantage is troublesome. First, only a few firms claim to possess sustained competitive advantage. Second, measuring valuable resources that firms cannot imitate poses severe problems in demonstrating value independent of the resource impact on performance and measuring unique or nearly unique entities. Third, under the concept of RBV, the prescription is

problematic because it is impossible to prescribe things that firms can readily implement. Because these things are imitated, resulting in duplication, their uniqueness is compromised.

RBV theory indicates the predictors of organizational performance, growth, and profitability, which depend on how organizations use heterogeneous resources to gain competitive advantage. Chatterjee et al. (2021) and Elia et al. (2021) posited that organizations are perceived to gain a competitive advantage over existing contemporary organizations functioning in the market when they possess VRIN resources. Competitive advantage is the degree to which the performance of an organization can achieve more significant benefits than other organizations functioning in similar conditions (Ghilavi et al., 2021; Wang & Gao, 2021). Researchers have alluded to the idea that competitive advantage for businesses, particularly when sustained over the long term, comes from firm resources and capabilities (Kryscynski et al., 2021; Wang & Gao, 2021). The RBV theory approach suggests that the company's primary goal is to gain a competitive advantage that produces higher efficiency than average (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Ghilavi et al., 2021). Hamid et al. (2020) and Lestari et al. (2020) indicated that achieving a competitive advantage reduces costs and improves efficiency. A sustainable competitive advantage is more accessible when resources create value for customers, leading to superior efficiency and profitability for the organization.

RBV theory explains the effects of innovation on corporations' success. Researchers have argued that an organization's success derives from its resources and

capabilities connected to products and services (Li et al., 2020; Mokhtarzadeh et al., 2020). The relationship between a corporation's resources, capability, and innovation determines its success in terms of performance and profit (Lukovszki et al., 2020; Mokhtarzadeh et al., 2020). An organization's resources and capabilities are its main business functions, while innovation synergizes with the business functions (Dinali Viglioni & Leal Calegario, 2021; Lukovszki et al., 2020). Researchers on the RBV theory have posited that the differences in corporations' performance are driven mainly by leadership, ownership culture, and the use of resources and capabilities (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Varadarajan, 2020). RBV theory is needed for organizations to improve the use of resources and capabilities essential for organizations' adaptation to the outside environment (Ghilavi et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2021). RBV theory, which focuses on internal capabilities and resources, addresses enterprise sustainability, performance, and profitability leading to organizations benefit from continuous growth and was a suitable foundation for this study.

The RBV is highly relevant to the performance of SMEs, as it involves the assumption that internal competencies are the building blocks for increased performance and competitive advantage. RBV theory indicates that organizations' resources are financial, physical, human, and organizational assets (Davis & DeWitt, 2021; Lose, 2021). RBV theory is an inside-out approach that considers corporate resources before customers and competitors (Day & Shea, 2020; Varadarajan, 2020). Gorovaia and Windsperger (2018) and Ogunyemi (2020) argued that organizational resources include

intangible knowledge-based resources such as system-specific know-how and brand names. Thus, RBV theory, which focuses on tangible and intangible resources, addresses enterprise sustainability, performance, and profitability.

### **Researchers' Contrasting Views on Resource-Based View Theory**

Other researchers have also raised reservations about RBV theory and resources being rare and valuable, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable to attain sustained competitive advantage. Danish (2018) presented a definitional problem in determining whether a resource is valuable when it is nontradeable and the market cannot value it. Bhatta (2017) also argued that firms' sustained competitive advantage does not mean profitability because different firms have different goals. Bromiley and Rau (2016) and Bhatta (2017) argued that even RBV scholars have not clarified what "sustained" means in "sustained competitive advantage" (i.e., it is unclear whether a sustained period is 1 year or 20 years). The views of researchers contrasting the proponents of RBV theory were to gain clarity and understanding of the theory.

The contrasting views of RBV theory bring further clarity to the theory on imitability. The notion of imitability may be misleading because a firm can use any resource previously used by another firm for strategic development in a competitive marketplace (Bromiley & Rau, 2016). Firms operating in the same competing environment could use the same strategic resources to implement strategies but achieve varied outcomes due to differentiation in their capabilities making them unique. The uniqueness of resources and a firm gaining competitive advantage rest not only on

imitability, but also on the combination of capabilities mediating the implementation of business strategies with unique resources (Forrest & Liu, 2022). Although Bromiley and Rau's criticism of RBV does not invalidate it as a framework, many firms have used it to develop sustainable business strategies. Hitt et al. (2016) conducted a study based on Bromiley and Rau's criticism of RBV; they found that the analysis was limited to the works of Barney, making the complaint fall short of solid evidence to support a contrary point, and they concluded that RBV is a valuable framework for business strategy. Alternative theories (frameworks) that could have formed the conceptual framework for this study included dynamic capability and entrepreneurial orientation; these frameworks have been used in several doctoral studies at Walden.

## **Supporting and Contrasting Theories**

### ***Dynamic Capabilities***

Scholars have used the concept of dynamic capabilities (DCs) in strategic management and have described the DC concept as an extension of the RBV. DCs help a business integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to enhance performance in unstable business environments (Ndeisieh, 2018; Pihlajamaa, 2021; Teece et al., 1997). The ability of a corporation to combine specific resources (i.e., VRIN resources) and build in-house routines to handle unforeseen events, thereby providing an organization with the risk resilience and acumen to thrive in unpredictable circumstances, is the characteristic of DC (Rohrbeck & Kum, 2018; Schoemaker & Day, 2020).

Furthermore, DCs enable businesses to constantly refocus and review the influence of

specific resources on their success. Semke and Tiberius (2020) concluded that firms used DCs to identify opportunities and threats and reconfigure their resources to exploit and avoid hazards. Therefore, DCs are a complementary framework for the RBV because small business owners need DCs to transform resources through successful strategies into highly sustainable enterprises.

Leaders of SMEs need to develop distinctive competencies to drive business success and gain a competitive edge over rivals. DC is a mediating factor between VRIN resources and firm positive performance (Singh et al., 2020). Bhandari et al. (2020) posited that building a higher order DC can help a company achieve a competitive advantage. The RBV assertions concur with the sustainability of competitive advantage due to the use of VRIN resources (Bhandari et al., 2020). Reviewing the difficulties faced by small businesses focusing on a few strategic resources may help small businesses to achieve competitive advantage and increase sustainability opportunities.

For a small business, sustainable competitive advantage in the face of difficulties needs DC. Donbesuur et al. (2020) suggested that small businesses prioritizing information and communication technology (ICT) capabilities can be a valuable source of DCs and help them survive in uncertain business environments. Furthermore, Hermano et al. (2022) posited a positive relationship between DCs and SMEs' firm performance. Because SMEs have limited financial resources, building a winning strategy may require them to focus on internal resources such as human capital, which they can harness through competent personnel to generate DC (Hu & Kee, 2021).

Therefore, DCs encompass the management of capabilities and resources of all functions of firms, with the final objective to get competitive advantage and sustainability.

### ***Entrepreneurial Orientation***

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) is the strategic placement and capacity to capture market elements through an organization's decision-making styles, strategies, and procedures. EO is envisioning what it means for organizations to be entrepreneurial (Okoli et al., 2021; Wales et al., 2020). EO relies on innovation, being proactive, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy (Okreglicka & Lemanska-Majdzik, 2019; Wales et al., 2020). As an idea in entrepreneurship, EO is a medium for achieving SMEs' profitability, success, and growth (MusahDonkoh et al., 2021; Okoli et al., 2021). From an RBV perspective, EO is a distinct organizational capability of intangible resources valuable in identifying, analyzing, and executing new opportunities that cannot be easily substituted or imitated (Fan et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2021). EO drives internal processes and allows leaders of small businesses to be creative to gain a market advantage (Ferrerias-Méndez et al., 2021; Isichei et al., 2020). EO consists of decision-making styles, strategies, and procedures, from innovation, risk-taking, proactiveness, competitive aggression, and autonomy toward entrepreneurship to achieve profitability, success, and growth for an organization.

### ***Organizational Performance***

An organization's performance is the assessment of net outcomes that the organization derives. Organizational performance includes financial and marketing



aspects, market share, return on investment, sales growth, and net profit (Kreye & Perunovic, 2020; Markovitch et al., 2020). Organizational performance is also about how an organization can successfully achieve its goals by harnessing resources (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Al-Qudah et al., 2020). RBV theory identifies the predictor of organizational performance, which depends on the acquisition of VRIN resources (Muchiri & Muli, 2021; Naseer et al., 2021). The ability to acquire VRIN resources is perceived to influence the competitive advantage of organizations (Bayon & Aguilera, 2020; Puspita et al., 2020). By achieving the uniqueness of VRIN resources, organizations gain a competitive advantage over contemporaries functioning in the same market.

RBV theory focuses on the nexus between a firm's internal capabilities toward gaining competitive advantage and is a relevant theory to study firm performance. A firm's strategic resources are varied and distributed to create value for superior performance (Arbelo et al., 2021; O'Mahony & Karp, 2020). Firms gain a sustainable competitive advantage by deploying strategies that create value and enhance performance so that neither current nor potential competitors can replicate (Forrest et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2021). Firms sustain competitive advantage when its resources like physical, human, or capital are differentiated and not easily transferred (Kryscynski et al., 2021; Lose, 2021). Firms loss of competitive advantage when the resources are not distinguished, because competitors can easily acquire or produce similar products.

Internal resources are central to gaining competitive advantage and superior organizational performance because they are assumed to be rare, valuable, inimitable, and

nonsubstitutable (VRIN resources). Hervás-Oliver et al. (2021) corroborated that the inimitability of firm resources creates sustainable value. For sustainable value to occur, the firm must have proprietary rights that prevent imitation, making it difficult to derive the same output and causal ambiguity (Mazzarol & Reboud, 2020; Sharapov & MacAulay, 2020). Causal ambiguity means when the firm and the competitors recognize its superior position, and neither can specifically explain its performance by any single resource or combination (Kryscynski et al., 2021; Maijanen, 2020). Bakker and de Vries (2021) and Kaufman (2020) explained the importance of combining resources, to make an organization unique and not the resources themselves making the organization unique. Organizational performance is a response to the distinctive value created using the inimitable internal resources to gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Proponents of the RBV explored the importance of history in understanding firm performance. Busby (2019) and Randhawa et al. (2021) opined that leaders evolved and only develop the capabilities that the organization deploys from experience. Organizations will deplete, replenish, and enhance the resources in utilizing these resources (Busby, 2019; Fletcher-Brown et al., 2021). Busby (2019) and Alexandrovsky et al. (2021) emphasized that while it is impossible to imitate a company's resources, the firm's output imitation can arise from competitors' parasitic and counterfeiting activities. Such output imitation activities can affect the reputation and brand of the company and its relative competitive position in its industry (Elche et al., 2021). However, Zahra (2021) and Chen et al. (2021a) countered that imitation means that the firm's resource

deployment is not strategic or has not responded appropriately to changes in its environment. Organizational performance results from leaders' resource combination and strategy deployment to sustain competitive advantage and protect the product from counterfeiting.

### The Relationship Between Entrepreneurship and Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises

The relationship between entrepreneurship and SMEs goes back to values creation contributing to society's socio-economy and environment. Akinbola et al. (2019) and Kansheba (2020) corroborated the relationship between entrepreneurship and SMEs as a link of one leading to the other to create value. Understanding the significance in the market and society is essential to realize the connection between what and how entrepreneurship and SMEs function (Sadiku-Dushi et al., 2019; Shaher & Ali, 2020). Entrepreneurship and SMEs are recognized globally as the backbone of all economic development (Ibi-Oluwatoba et al., 2020; Van Tien, 2022). Entrepreneurship enables the creation of SMEs in society to meet the demand of changing environments.

Entrepreneurship and SMEs have an everyday basis to satisfy the changing needs of society. Although the meanings of entrepreneurship and small business are related, the two concepts are different (Crovini et al., 2021; Fan et al., 2021). Entrepreneurship has been the object of various research fields, from economics to sociology, history, management, psychology, anthropology, and even humanities (Nuvolari et al., 2018; Thornton, 2020). SMEs are usually businesses with between 10 and 199 employees

(SMEDAN & NBS, 2017). SMEs are businesses owned by individuals to create economic, social, and environmental values (Obi et al., 2018; Pinkovetskaia et al., 2019). Entrepreneurship is a complex activity involving various talents, abilities, and skills characterized by different performance outcomes to create value and profit. At the same time, SME is a business venture that adds value to society and helps reduce poverty in the community.

### **Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship is a process of enhancing social transformation, economic growth, the supply of services, and new products by stimulating creativity and producing innovative ideas. Entrepreneurship is a career of interest, given how it helps overcome financial crises, potentiating a solid economy, creative, sustainable development, and new job opportunities (Cardella et al., 2021; Costa & Pita, 2021). Entrepreneurship concerns individuals' discovering and exploiting profit opportunities independently because markets are not in equilibrium or lucrative market imperfections. (Alvarez & Barney, 2020). Entrepreneurship is identifying and using opportunities to solve business problems in society and make a profit.

Entrepreneurship creates value for society through innovation, risk, and opportunity for profit. Entrepreneurship also requires creative or innovative minds that take risks to challenge and create new markets in the community (Ibi-Oluwatoba et al., 2020; Jin & Lee, 2020). Entrepreneurship expands individual decision-makers' capabilities to explore opportunities in an environment marked by dynamics and

uncertainty (Mahmood et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021). Entrepreneurship can also offer a competitive advantage to the SME through risky decisions that pay off in developing innovative products, services, and markets in a complex managerial environment and moving proactively to dominate a competitive market (Aidara et al., 2021; Jin & Lee, 2020). Entrepreneurship creates value for society, SME business leaders, and the government through individuals leveraging on opportunities, innovation, risk-taking, efficient use of resources in a dynamic competitive environment to create millions of jobs for citizens, returns on investment for the business owners, and revenues for the government, and thus economic growth for a country.

### **Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises**

The organization for economic cooperation and development (OECD) indicated that SMEs worldwide constitute over 95% of all businesses, accounting for 70% of employment globally, and provide a significant share of new jobs in various countries. Researchers have suggested that SMEs are critical for every country's job creation, sustainable wealth creation, and economic growth (Amakom & Amagwu, 2020; Bhattacharya & Mitra, 2020). SMEs are a source of innovation in most countries (Kraus et al., 2020; Yew, 2021). The number of SMEs in Nigeria that have stunted growth and failed within 5 years of inception range between 80-85% (Agwu & Emeti, 2014; Asikhia & Naidoo, 2020). SMEs are usually business organizations with between 10 and 199 employees and a capital base of 5-500 million naira (SMEDAN & NBS, 2017; Racheal & Uju, 2018). Elijah and Usaini (2021) and Osemene et al. (2017) alluded that SMEs in

Nigeria contribute to economic growth by providing 95% of the productive activities and creating 70% of the country's job opportunities generating up to 70% of GDP. Despite the high propensity towards failure inherent in SMEs across the developed and developing economies, there has been broad agreement about their significant contributions to economic development in all countries.

SMEs in any country play a vital role in economic and developmental growth. SMEs are businesses owned by individuals to create economic, social, and environmental values (Obi et al., 2018; Pinkovetskaia et al., 2019). SMEs create value that enhances financial growth, decreases poverty, and reduces unemployment (Fatoki, 2018; Jauhari & Periansya, 2021). Bello et al. (2018) and Ufua et al. (2020b) suggested that SMEs are the ingredient for industrial development in a developing economy. Through innovation in their business activities, SMEs emerge in most economies to improve the life pattern of people and social wellbeing (Jacinto & Du Preez, 2018; Ojimaajo et al., 2020). SMEs support society through their goods/services by closing the demand gaps and generating revenue for organizations and the government through taxes from these organizations.

All societies' economic development and prosperity depend on how small and medium entrepreneurs nurture and develop businesses. SMEs are the pillars of economic development and the empowerment of communities (Asikhia & Naidoo, 2020; Miranda & Miranda, 2018). SMEs catalyze entrepreneurship, enhance employment opportunities and stable economic development, and mitigate rural-urban migration and resource utilization. Starting up SME businesses could be through local art, such as painting, bag

making, shoemaking, hairdressing/beauty salon, and fashion design/cloth making using locally sourced materials (Bello et al., 2018; Eniola, 2020). Also, SMEs can be involved in food manufacturing from local producers to reduce dependence on imported foods and increase the consumption of locally made products to boost the national economy (Nurjaya et al., 2020; Ojimaajo et al., 2020). SMEs generate local businesses, grow the economy, create social values, and cause development in the community (Fatoki, 2018; Surya et al., 2021). SMEs create employment and economic well-being for the citizenry reducing poverty and migration from the community.

SMEs' birth, growth, and sustainability are essential for economic growth and development in a nation. Despite the financial values, the high propensity toward failure is inherent in SMEs across the world (Bakari & Jen, 2021; Okoli et al., 2021). Nigeria SMEs are constantly challenged by leadership, financial inaccessibility, inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent government policies, capacity development, multiple taxation, and outdated technologies, leading to a high failure rate (Etim & Daramola, 2020; Okoli et al., 2021). Today in Nigeria, many SMEs were bourne out of unavailability of employment (Anugwu & Adani, 2021; Olaore et al., 2020). Human capital management, access to financing, stakeholder relationship maintenance, and technology impair the SMEs' sustainability and success.

### ***SME Leaders***

SME leaders are entrepreneurs sensitive to their environment to see opportunities or challenges and turn them around to make a difference toward economic and social

benefits. SMEs are born out of the creativity and innovations of the owners or leaders (Banwo, 2020; Guo, 2018). The SME leaders' have a high-risk appetite for economic and social activities, with a solid desire for "excellence" to accomplish inner feelings (Ismanto et al., 2020; Pramono et al., 2021). SME leaders are more optimistic in perceiving situations; therefore, engaging in activities that generally people are reluctant about due to the high risk involved for economic benefit (Aghaei & Sokhanvar, 2020; Kottika et al., 2020). SME leaders source revenue from their savings, equities, government, and financial institutions to start the business, create jobs, reduce unemployment, and improve citizens' standard of living. (Calme & Polge, 2018; Ogochukwu & Kasztelnik, 2021). SME leaders fulfill their desire by starting up businesses and exploring their environment to meet society's needs and make a financial benefit.

SME leaders are entrepreneurs exploring and willing to pioneer and capitalize on emerging opportunities. SMEs are founded and managed by individual entrepreneurs with a range of knowledge, competencies, and skills for competitive advantage to achieve business goals (Fazal et al., 2019; Wikaningrum et al., 2020). SME leaders' competence is triggered during a business's startup to develop strategies based on owned resources, human capital, knowledge, skills, competencies, and material assets to achieve competitive advantage (Aidara et al., 2021; Zizile & Tendai, 2018). SME leaders are value creators to their customers and society, being creative, innovative, proactive, and taking risks to achieve competitive advantage (Schaefer et al., 2020; Wikaningrum et al.,



2020). SME leaders are entrepreneurs seeking a competitive advantage through competence and leadership to create value for society and the organization.

The leadership style incorporated by an SME influences the organization's performance through diverse leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, situational, participatory, delegatory, and servant leadership styles. SMEs' leadership style enhances organizational and employee job performance, advancing social and economic contribution to society (Balasubramaniam et al., 2021; Manzoor et al., 2019). A transformational leader motivates his employees and encourages followers to do more than they can imagine (Northouse, 2019; Yue et al., 2019). Transformational leadership is considered a central leadership style that influences individual and organizational outcomes to achieve competitive advantage (Afriyie et al., 2019; Astuty & Udin, 2020). In contrast, the transactional leadership style involves values relevant to exchange processes, such as honesty, responsibility, and reciprocity (Achmad & Fitriansyah, 2021; Alharbi, 2021). Transactional leadership style has a strong positive correlation with the performance of the employees because of the gains (Kalsoom et al., 2018; Purwanto et al., 2020). SME transformational and transactional business leaders are entrepreneurial to achieve business continuity and survival in a dynamic environment.

A leadership style change triggered by a relevant environmental shift demands intentional responses to accommodate new procedures, processes, values, and personnel. SME leaders adapt to changes in a dynamic and creative environment to sustain economic and business development (Birasnav & Bienstock, 2019; Castellanos &

George, 2020; Dewi et al., 2020). SMEs' change initiatives include a wide array of topics such as introducing new technologies, mergers and acquisitions, organizational restructuring, changes in executive leadership, downsizing, and layoffs (Fløvik et al., 2019; Wynen et al., 2020). Additionally, SME leaders manage human capital with these changes to enhance employee and organizational performance (Subramony et al., 2018). The leadership ideology of product or service innovation and creativity influences the employees and determines the improvement and sustainability of the organization (Iqbal et al., 2020; Ullah et al., 2021). Intellectual capital encourages organizational transformation, continuity, and achievement of SMEs' growth, and it is a significant measure of a company's competitiveness in a knowledge-based economy (Rehman et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). SME leaders are entrepreneurial to sustain and grow the business, motivating employees in a turbulent environment, increasing human capital and organizational performance to achieve sustainability to benefit economic development.

SME leaders are business leaders and have a significant role in the sustainability of their businesses. A business leader's capacity to lead the organization determines sustainability (Eweje, 2020; Prentice & Zeng, 2018). The SME leaders implement action strategies to run an enterprise or a new venture for sustainability (Aldianto et al., 2021; Prentice & Zeng, 2018). The business environment is dynamic and competitive, which requires an entrepreneur's alertness to the changes that could guide leaders in decision-making (Rehman et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). An SME leader could change the organization using a leadership style that would enable the employees to adapt to the

organization and business environment for sustainability (Prentice & Zeng, 2018; Prospero et al., 2019). The SME leaders are responsible for sustaining and growing their businesses to achieve the nation's economic development and survival.

### ***SME Growth***

SME growth has developed several critical insights and importance over the years. SME business growth means positive changes in annual turnover, annual profit, number of employees, and customers (Gyanwali, 2018; Nyarku & Oduro, 2018). Salder et al. (2020) interpreted SMEs' evolving growth as a linear and cumulative phenomenon inevitable in the business process of increasing the firm size. Okafor et al. (2020) listed other growth indicators as growing sales, profit, assets, improvement in internal processes, and increased staff strength, while Muo et al. (2020) included diversification into new markets as a growth factor. The growth may be absolute (increase in employment and sales), a fast or robust increase in sales, slow, regular, and irregular (Bodlaj et al., 2020; Muo et al., 2020). SMEs' growth is after acquiring the required resources, knowledge, skills, and attitude to enhance efficiency and operational effectiveness (Beynon et al., 2020; Gancarczyk et al., 2020). SMEs' performance, profitability, and sustainability are indications of growth.

SMEs' growth evidence is by entrepreneurship behavior of the leaders or entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship growth is a creative act of gathering all existing resources to create new wealth or growth for SMEs (Do, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2019). Business financial performance measurements are economical, value-adding, return on

investment, and equity, indicating SMEs' growth (Ibrahim & Martins, 2020; Maeenuddina et al., 2020). ICTs are essential to the business growth of SMEs in round the world (Babarinde et al., 2020; Sariwulan et al., 2020). Business leaders self-appraise firms' performance through subjective and self-reported measures to determine growth (Ibrahim & Martins, 2020; Pramono et al., 2021). The operational development and excellent financial performance of an SME are indications of business growth toward sustainability.

### ***Economic and Social Impact of SMEs***

The United Nations (UN) economic programs have echoed the importance of strategic initiatives toward achieving the sustainability goal in its policy guidelines. The united nation's sustainable development goals for all by the year 2030 emphasize critical sustainable economic growth indicators, such as no poverty (goal 1), zero hunger (goal 2), and decent work and economic growth (goal 8) (Biermann et al., 2017; Kanie & Biermann, 2017; United Nations, 2015). SMEs have been the drivers that steer economic growth through entrepreneurial ventures. Researchers have suggested that SMEs are critical for job creation, sustainable wealth creation, and the economic development of every country (Amakom & Amagwu, 2020; Bhattacharya & Mitra, 2020). Researchers have also lauded the strategic importance of SMEs in driving sustainable economic growth and improving well-being in Nigeria (Effiong & Essien, 2022; Opute, 2020). Nigeria's SMEs impact the economy by creating jobs, reducing unemployment, reducing poverty, and improving citizens' well-being.

SMEs are pivotal for economic and social growth. Adeosun and Shittu (2021) and Opute (2020) indicated that SMEs as entrepreneurial ventures impact the growing economy in Nigeria because of their various financial contributions. SMEs are relevant because they participate in corporate social responsibility (CSR), promoting social welfare through education, providing clean water to drink and health care services, and developing individual talents in society (Ajibola, 2020; Metzker & Streimikis, 2020). SMEs pay attention to solving problems outside the economy, environment, and social issues determined by specific barriers to the development of societal activities (Li et al., 2020; Metzker & Streimikis, 2020). The improvement in the performance of SMEs determines the number of employees needed, which means the performance of the firms is directly proportional to the number of employment opportunities the firm creates (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021; Bandara et al., 2020). SMEs embark on social activities to meet expected societal needs and grow their businesses.

SME leaders ensure that SMEs are innovative and knowledgeable to ensure the organizations' growth and provide much-needed opportunities in society. Innovation is the key to staying competitive, improving the performance of SME businesses in making high-quality goods and delivering services to the people, and creating employment opportunities to enhance society's economy (Ali et al., 2020; Grabowska & Saniuk, 2022). Most SMEs resource their raw materials locally from their communities or country, which increases the total monetary value of goods produced within a community or nation (Fatoki, 2018; Surya et al., 2021). Also, there is an opportunity to export locally

made products to the international market where these products are needed (Chong et al., 2019; Fatoki, 2018). Many SMEs purchase their resources locally, which means they can improve the locally produced raw material markets, enhancing the economy for the benefit of society (Chong et al., 2019; Surya et al., 2021). SMEs provide goods and services and create employment in the community, promoting significant societal and economic development.

### ***Areas of Perceived Challenges Faced by SMEs***

SMEs face diverse challenges that hinder their sustainability beyond 5 years from inception. Most SMEs operate sole proprietorships, partnerships, or limited liability companies, with low funds and leadership skills, multiple taxations, and inadequate infrastructure (Ojiakor et al., 2018; Ojimaajo et al., 2020). Some SMEs started because the owners wanted to try a business for lack of employment. Howard et al. (2019) and Umadia and Kasztelnik (2020) emphasized the lack of leadership skills by SME owners who ventured into business because of a lack of employment. SMEs are firms with small capacities compared to large organizations (Ajour & Alikor, 2020; Ufua et al., 2020b). Ironically, most SMEs cannot afford to pay high salaries like large organizations by introducing unskilled labor. These challenges and others affect SME businesses' operation, management, performance, and sustainability.

#### **Inadequate Leadership Skills.**

SME leaders have a significant role in the growth and sustainability of their businesses. SME business leaders demonstrating the suitable leadership capacity and

knowledge in managing an organization enhances the organization's sustainability and survival (Júnior et al., 2020; Prentice & Zeng, 2018). SME leaders with inadequate leadership skills, ability, attributes, and business plans cannot cope with the growing business demands, leading to failure (Bamata et al., 2019; Mukwarami et al., 2018). SME leaders who lack leadership skills and exposure constantly earn negative profits and lost market share, which leads to SMEs' business failure (Madueke et al., 2020; Ramli & Razali, 2019). The failure of SMEs mainly arises from insufficient business knowledge and qualifications, including poor personal and leadership training and inadequate treatment of clients (Madueke et al., 2020; Rattanapongpinyo, 2018). SME leaders could change the organization using appropriate leadership styles to enable their employees to adapt to the organization and business environment for profitability and sustainability (Prentice & Zeng, 2018; Prospero et al., 2019). Leadership and managerial competencies are critical for the sustainability of SME business.

SME leaders need to utilize their potential properly while depicting good leadership to improve innovation, motivation, resource management, performance, and sustainability. The leadership style incorporated by an SME leader influences the SME's performance. Leadership style in an organization affects organizational performance, employee job performance, and decisions on socio-economic contribution to society (Balasubramaniam et al., 2021; Manzoor et al., 2019). A transformational leadership style motivates the employees and encourages them to do more than they can imagine (Northouse, 2019; Yue et al., 2019). The transactional leadership style involves values

relevant to exchange processes, such as honesty, responsibility, and reciprocity (Achmad & Fitriansyah, 2021; Alharbi, 2021). The leadership style adopted by several empirical studies shows that transformational leadership improves SMEs' performance (Boukamcha, 2019). In contrast, transactional leadership focuses on completing organizational tasks by motivating subordinates to carry out their responsibilities (Islam et al., 2019; Wahyuni et al., 2020). The blended leadership style of transformational and transactional adopted by SMEs determines their profitability, sustainability, and survival in a dynamic business environment.

#### **Inadequate Financial Capacity.**

SMEs contribute to economic growth and development by providing employment and alleviating poverty. However, sustainability and growth in SMEs are challenging (Onileowo & Fasiku, 2021; Ufua et al., 2020a; Yusoff et al., 2018). SMEs face various challenges, including funding, inadequate infrastructure to operate, especially electricity, and knowledge gaps affecting their growth (Tahir et al., 2021; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020). Researchers have identified finance as a significant challenge for SMEs (Eggers, 2020). Festus Folajinmi and Olufemi Peter (2020) and Harianti et al. (2021) speculated that SMEs have financial problems because they lack adequate financial management. Many SME leaders lack the proper books of accounts and records that ensure the organization accounts for all the money spent (Abubakar, 2020; Osim Etim et al., 2020). The lack of adequate financial resources leads to hampering SME success. However,



SMEs could overcome this challenge by implementing better ways to access finance and adapting financial management skills.

### **Inadequate Electric Supply.**

Electricity supply is vital to the economic development of any nation. SMEs in Nigeria face the challenge of nonsustainable sources of electricity (Bassey & Imoh, 2021; Okafor et al., 2020). The SMEs operating in Nigeria have a challenge accessing sustainable electricity leading to the high cost of production and affecting competitiveness (Akyuz & Opusunju, 2020; Bassey & Imoh, 2021). The poor electricity supply has also resulted in heavy dependence on self-generation by the Nigerian residential, government, and manufacturing sectors (Obi et al., 2021; Okafor et al., 2020). SMEs that emerge in villages and towns in Nigeria fold up almost daily, at most within the first few years of operation, because of this constraint (Ayor & Alikor, 2020; Olayemi & Folajimi, 2021). The provision of alternate electricity supply increases the cost of operation for the SMEs and leads to dwindling finance, but it will lead to sustainable business.

The sourcing of alternate electricity limits SMEs' finances. Alternate electricity for SMEs' survival and practical contribution to Nigeria and Rivers state's economic growth. (Ayor & Alikor, 2020; Ukairo et al., 2021). The government has the role of promoting the business environment by ensuring access to electricity for SMEs. Firms improve the economy by alleviating poverty, generating employment, enhancing human development, and improving social welfare (Opara, 2021; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020).

Access to electricity is still a challenge in Nigeria, even though it is required to improve its economy (Gift et al., 2020; Ikeanyibe, 2021). Electricity is a vital input to the industrialization of any nation and the economic growth and wellbeing of the citizenry.

Nigeria's epileptic power or electricity supply to its populace has significantly affected its economic development and poverty elimination. The electricity supply in Nigeria is despicable as businesses experience average power outages of 239 hours monthly, accounting for nearly seven percent of lost sales and causing economic losses over US\$25 billion annually (Kingsley & Tonuchi, 2021; World Bank, 2017). Nigeria is generating one of the lowest per capita quantities of electricity globally at 145kWh per capita at a period (Owebor et al., 2021; World Bank, 2019). Edomah et al. (2021) and Kanger et al. (2020) posited that Nigeria's electricity sector had experienced significant changes in infrastructure development over the past century, addressing infrastructure challenges to meet the rising energy needs. At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nigeria experienced more private sector and multilateral organization participation in providing centralized and decentralized electricity systems (Edomah et al., 2021). Having a sustainable electricity supply is essential for SME sustainability and survival.

### **Multiple Taxation.**

SMEs encounter various taxes and levies from officials of many government agencies and their third-party contractors for the federal, state, and local governments. Small and medium business entrepreneurs, especially in Rivers State, which serves as Nigeria's oil and gas nerve center, have diverse taxations that often lead to liquidating

their businesses (Ajibola, 2020; Daniel, 2019). Ajibola (2020) emphasized that high tax rates and multiple taxations affect SMEs' growth and profitability. There is a need for a fit in the tax system to favor the survival, development, and sustainability of the SME sectors in Nigeria. Alashe and Olawore (2021) considered the tax an essential avenue for the government to finance its projects and programs. SMEs swung with the problem of high tax rates, multiple taxations, and complex tax regulations, which have resulted in the high infant mortality of most SMEs operating in Nigeria (Bello et al., 2018). Taxes are an essential channel for government revenue, the administration of taxes should not inflict pain on SMEs, and payment should not be detrimental to SME sustainability.

The syndrome of tax multiplicity affects the SMEs' income generation, and its effect has broader implications on Nigerian SMEs. Accordingly, multiple taxes harm SMEs' capital cash flow and sales performance of SMEs in Nigeria (Alashe & Olawore, 2021). Bello et al. (2018) and Judith et al. (2022) argued that multiple taxes negatively affect SME profitability. Favorable policies such as tax waivers or incentives can also help encourage and promote SMEs' performance, growth, and productivity (Obafemi et al., 2021; Olayemi & Folajimi, 2021). The tax incentive is any particular tax treatment beneficial for enterprises within the SME spectrum, granting preferential treatment to specific activities and investments (Obafemi et al., 2021; Olayemi & Folajimi, 2021). SME leaders agreed that multiple taxations affect the financial performance of their businesses; they also decided that excessive multiple taxations impact SMEs' budgetary and planning commission, leading to unsustainable enterprises.

### **Lack of Access to Digital Technology.**

SMEs may lack access to digital technology, which is a big challenge in developing growth strategies. These issues are lack of technology knowledge, lack of research and development (R&D), and lack of capital to invest in R&D for selecting the appropriate technology (Davicik et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). While technology can automate several operational business activities, many SMEs continue to perform these activities manually (Ajibola, 2020; Margherita & Braccini, 2021). The manual operation by SMEs also leads to loss of efficiency, reduced capacity to scale up production of goods and services, and decreased ability to gain market share (Kaspin, 2021; Surya et al., 2021). Digital technologies include real-time data analytics, robotic process automation, and artificial intelligence (AI); to undergo digital transformation (Chen et al., 2021b; Pan & Lee, 2020). SMEs' accounting functions leverage data analytics to enhance their financial analysis capability and revenue growth prediction in developing their future business strategy (Kruskopf et al., 2019; Pan & Lee, 2020). Digital transformation of SME processes is an innovative course that will lead to efficiency, profitability, growth, and sustainability beyond 5 years from inception.

Digital transformation describes a company-wide change that leads to new business models, improving its competitive advantage and creating value. There are three phases of digital transformation: digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation (Pan & Lee, 2020; Vrana & Singh, 2021). Digital transformation rearranges the processes, routines, and capabilities and changes the business logic to improve

competitive advantage and create value (Li et al., 2018). The relationship between technological innovation (product and process) and SME performance (measured as firms' financial turnover) has a significant impact on SMEs' performance (Donbesuur et al., 2020). A vast amount of human and monetary resources and information are prerequisites for driving innovation in terms of digitalization. Still, the benefits outweigh the project's total cost, giving the SME a competitive advantage and creating value.

### **High Rate of Correpption.**

Corruption is endemic in the government of Nigeria, especially in the agencies that have the role of helping SMEs. Crime has eroded the people's trust in the government, and it prevents the success of SMEs (Jegede & Irewole, 2021; Ufua et al., 2020a). Corruption threatens Nigeria's long-term development and prevents SMEs from being sustainable (Ajibola, 2020; Igwe et al., 2018; Page & Okeke, 2019). Corruption has exacerbated mismanagement in Nigeria because of massive policy failures; the policies implemented to improve the business environment do not have the expected impact (Fagbadebo, 2019; Ogbuke et al., 2020). Crime hurts the government's assistance to the SMEs operating in Nigeria, negatively affecting economic growth (Metu et al., 2018; Obamuyi & Olayiwola, 2019). There is a need for legislation against corruption in Nigeria to challenge corporations' and regulators' irresponsibility to minimal law enforcement (Noah et al., 2020). Crime disrupts SMEs' business success and affects sustainability in Nigeria.

## **Sustainability**

Sustainability has become the business term of the 21st century. Small and medium businesses in the 21st century must enhance and balance their economic, social, and environmental performance to prosper (Haessler, 2020). Researchers defined sustainability as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Markard et al., 2020; Stawicka, 2021). Sustainability is a valuable element in business, where economic, social, and environmental responsibilities integrate into business strategy. Sustainability in SMEs' business addresses: the effect that the industry has on the environment and the impact that the business has on society (Ajour & Alikor, 2020; Shields & Shelleman, 2020). A business leader's primary focus is establishing the direction of a successful business by influencing the organization's plans and policies and managing the change process to avoid resistance to change in a sustainable organization (Hossain et al., 2021; Shields & Shelleman, 2020). The sustainability of an organization largely depends on the organization's leadership with the mindset to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs).

With the global energy mix and crisis, business leaders are increasing awareness of environmental issues and climate changes. SMEs' sustainability demands greater transparency and regular disclosures of their contribution to a sustainable society. SMEs' participation in sustainability is critical because they account for more than ninety percent of the total industrial units worldwide (Reyes-Rodríguez & Ulhøi, 2022; Singh et al.,

2020). SMEs' activities contribute to society's natural environment, contributing up to seventy percent of global pollution (Hadj, 2020; Reyes-Rodríguez & Ulhøi, 2022). SMEs' investment in environmental management plans improves the firm's competitiveness (Fadly, 2020; Graafland, 2020). RBV theory offers a vital internal perspective for understanding a firm's competitive advantages toward sustainability (Chen et al., 2021a; Hamdoun, 2020). SMEs account for ninety percent of employment generation in any society and need to embrace sustainability.

SMEs are the driving force for the Nigerian economy, stimulating the local economy by providing employment sustainably bearing the global best practices. SMEs experience a significant change progressing into more sustainable forms to meet the stakeholder's expectations and follow the regulations to guard their profitability (Khana et al., 2020). SME sustainability contributes to organizations' economic prosperity, environmental protection, natural resources preservation, and the community (Abdulrahman, 2021; Al-Taai, 2021). SME sustainability is the capability that enables SMEs to compete effectively in the global market because of their competitive advantage and environmental and climate friendliness (Falahat et al., 2020; Prabowo et al., 2021). SME sustainability bears global best practices competing in the worldwide market with a competitive advantage, enhancing the business's survival and sustainability beyond 5 years.

SMEs' sustainability integrates environmental and social matters into their strategy. The sustainability of a business depends on the business leaders' considering the

environment, not impacting people's lives negatively in society. SME leaders are developing effective business models that will ensure success in whatever they do, focusing on sustainability (Oderanti et al., 2021; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020).

Sustainability caters to the present and future generations, ensuring environmental protection for the benefit of society in general (Markard et al., 2020; Stawicka, 2021). It is also essential to align organizational goals with SDGs to ensure that the given business benefits society (Fleacă et al., 2018; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2021). SMEs' sustainability strategy aligns with the organizational goals to achieve united nations sustainable development goals impacting the organization's bottom line and profitability.

SME operations involve human, financial, and social capital as essential tools for the sustainability of businesses. Human capital drives technology and artificial intelligence toward sustainability (Beynon et al., 2020; Nayak & Bhattacharyya, 2019). A good business financial capital influences companies' goals toward sustainability (Sultan et al., 2020; Umadia & Kasztelnik, 2020). Some business operations halt if good relationships with the host community are not maintained (Hurst et al., 2020; Walton & McCrea, 2020). To have seamless business operations and long-term viability, the business leader must have a way to keep all stakeholders pleased. SMEs achieve sustainability and survival through harnessing and implementing the right resources for organizational success.



### ***Factors Affecting Sustainability***

SMEs' sustainability is affected by social, cultural, and environmental factors, to mention but a few. The increased awareness of SMEs' roles and sustainability has drawn attention to entrepreneurs focusing on social, cultural, and environmental impacts (Khurana et al., 2021; Ndubisi et al., 2021). Sustainable entrepreneurship is an entrepreneurial process that innovatively exploits economic gains and equally important goals for social equity, environmental quality, and cultural preservation (Golsefid-Alavi et al., 2021; Kiganane, 2020). The discovery and exploitation of opportunities to create innovative goods and services consistent with sustainable development goals are relevant to tackling fundamental societal challenges such as climate change and potable water for a growing world population (Fichter & Tiemann, 2020). Entrepreneurial sustainability contributes to cleaner production, e.g., by increasing energy, water, resources, and human capital (Muñoz et al., 2020). The emergence of sustainable development, social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability have fulfilled the necessities of people living today, but within the earth's carrying capacity, so that future generations remain.

### ***Sustainable Strategies That SMEs Can Apply***

Economic globalization has created many challenges for SMEs due to the rapid increase in competition; the rate of SMEs folding within 5 years after inception is relatively high. Therefore, SMEs must adopt survival strategies to overcome global challenges (Bandara et al., 2020; Eggers, 2020). SMEs face sustainability, international,

and technological challenges. I addressed the SMEs' sustainability challenges with strategies because they contributed to poverty alleviation and sustainable economic growth. However, Julita and Tanjung (2019) and Naradda Gamage et al. (2020) suggested leadership style, entrepreneurship, innovation, and cost-effectiveness as the most effective strategy for SMEs. SME leaders' common objectives are to increase profits by reducing costs and raising market share by applying more low-priced products for sustainability and survival.

SMEs use strategies for sustainability and survival beyond 5 years. According to Barney (1991), a sustainable system centered on an RBV allow organizations to maintain a competitive advantage (Gibson et al., 2021). RBV theory suggests that inter-organizational relationships can lead SMEs to access resources (tangible or intangible), positively impacting the organization's performance and sustainability (Bianchi & Saleh, 2020; Naradda Gamage et al., 2020). The RBV principle is a strategic element using assets and expertise to compete (Gibson et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2021). Therefore, it is evident that SMEs will benefit when they acquire the right network to get the necessary resources for their performance, profitability to gain competitive advantage, and sustainability.

Adapting appropriate strategies is vital for SME business sustainability in a complex and competitive business environment. Gibson et al. (2021) and Das et al. (2020) suggested that corporate community collaboration is an SME sustainability strategy. Al Idrus et al. (2021) postulated that customer satisfaction is vital for SMEs to

achieve long-term business sustainability. RBV theory holds that SME leaders should select the method that best utilizes their internal resources relevant for external opportunities to achieve sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Hu & Kee, 2021). CSR strategies and customer satisfaction create lasting improvements in the quality of life for communities and simultaneously generate business value for the company in community support, reputational benefits, risk reduction, productivity gains, or competitive advantage and sustainability.

Innovation is one of the sustainability strategies SMEs use beyond 5 years. Innovation refers to unlimited creativity, improvement, invention, and the involvement of everyone in the enterprise in new ideas for the advancement of the organization (Cukier et al., 2021; Nimfa et al., 2021). SME innovation involves implementing a new or significantly improved product, business practices, workplace organization, or external relations (Ayor & Alikor, 2020). In a competitive environment, changes to approaches by individuals, employers, leaders, and stakeholders are evolving (Day & Shea, 2020; Naeem, 2020). SMEs must adapt to changes to survive and erode competitors' rivalry (Ayor & Alikor, 2020). SME leaders imbuing innovation is vital for sustainability beyond 5 years.

When initiating innovative strategies, corporations are deeply concerned with environmental issues such as global warming, environmental pollution, and climate change. Eco-innovation is the production of a product, production process, service, or business methods that are novel to the firm and which results, throughout its life cycle, in

a reduction of environmental risk, pollution, and other negative impacts of resource use compared to relevant alternatives (Ch'ng et al., 2021; Han & Chen, 2021). Bitencourt et al. (2020) and Muhammad et al. (2020) suggested that for SMEs to achieve long-term economic growth, and their innovation strategy should have environmental and social concerns as primary goals. Digital transformation of SME processes is an innovative course that will lead to efficiency, profitability, growth, and sustainability beyond 5 years from inception. Digital transformation rearranges the processes, routines, and capabilities and changes the business logic to improve competitive advantage and create value (Li et al., 2018). The benefits of digitalization outweigh the project's total cost, giving the SME a competitive advantage and creating value to achieve sustainability.

To maintain business survival, small business leaders must employ strategies to provide an alternate source of power, access to finance, financial, inventory management, capacity building, and human resource management. Proper funding and adopting the right financial management strategies can aid small businesses' sustainability (Ismanto et al., 2020). Opoku et al. (2021) posited that inventory management strengthens internal controls to ensure optimal and quality inventory while providing customer value. Hernita et al. (2021) suggested that human capacity building and human resources management contribute to increasing the productivity of economic enterprises and support the sustainability of SMEs. Leaders blend internal and external resources to achieve strategies toward the sustainability of a business.

## **Transition**

In section 1, I discussed the sustainability problems of SME leaders. A key point revealed is that 80-85% of the SMEs failed before the fifth year from inception.

Additionally, in Section 1, I highlighted how leaders who use the RBV theory enhanced their sustainability beyond 5 years by gaining a competitive advantage. I also reviewed theories and literature relevant to sustainability and competitive advantage. In Section 2, I discussed how I conducted the research and ensured trustworthiness. Critical points in Section 2 included ethical guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and The Belmont Report I followed in conducting this study. I discussed my strategy for the informed consent form, data collection, and analysis and how I ensured trustworthy research. In Section 3, I present the study's findings, answer the research question, and include how small and medium business leaders could use it in their sustainability strategy programs. Section 3 concludes with my recommendations for further research on the sustainability of small and medium businesses beyond 5 years, personal reflections, and a conclusion to this study.

## Section 2: The Project

SMEs are businesses with limited employees and capital, contributing to every country's growth and development. This study focused on unveiling the sustainability strategies that SME leaders used to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. I used a qualitative research method to collect data from the participants through semistructured interviews. The results from the analyzed data in the study may be helpful for SME leaders to sustain their business beyond 5 years and support economic development and social values in the community. This section includes a discussion on the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, the participants, research design and methods, data reliability, and validity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the sustainability strategies that SME leaders use to remain in business beyond 5 years. The sample consisted of three SME leaders in Rivers State, Nigeria, who remained in business for more than 5 years. The study's contribution to social change may be that implementing this study's successful strategies could reduce business closures, stimulate the economy, boost job creation, reduce unemployment, and reduce crime.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the primary instrument for this qualitative case study. Yin (2018) described the researcher's role as collecting, interpreting, and organizing data. As the primary data collection instrument, I collected, processed, and reported on the data collected and

analyzed the findings. I collected data using an interview protocol and conducted interviews using Zoom. I reviewed documents such as employee handbooks and annual reports for triangulation.

Building relationships with participants is one of the roles of a researcher. According to Hagues (2021) and Tinkler et al. (2018), it is important for a researcher to build a relationship with participants to gain their trust and maintain confidentiality. In qualitative research, a researcher interacts with participants to collect data for a study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I had experience supervising SME businesses from my 10 years as a contract holder in my company. Yin (2018) suggested that researchers understand the research topic before conducting research. Still, I adhered to strict ethical behavior to conduct this study. I selected participants from among SME leaders outside my domain with no business relationship with my present company.

I adhered to guidance from *The Belmont Report's* ethical standards for this research. In *The Belmont Report*, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice are the three principles that researchers use to protect participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Qualitative researchers rely on *The Belmont Report* to maintain ethical behavior throughout the research process. *The Belmont Report* is the foundation of all IRBs (Lantos, 2020). Anabo et al. (2019) recommended using the three principles of *The Belmont Report* to ensure that research meets ethical standards. The researcher's role is to adhere to *The Belmont Report's* ethical standards for interviewing participants. Therefore,

the consent form and interview protocol were tools that I used to demonstrate respect, maximization of benefits, and fairness to the participants.

I scheduled and conducted interviews with the participants who signed and returned the consent form. I accorded the participants respect and made them comfortable during the interview sessions. I represented participants using the alphanumeric symbols P1, P2, and P3 to ensure that they remained anonymous. I informed the participants that all the information provided would remain confidential and that the participants were at liberty to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition to following ethical guidelines, I conducted member checking to mitigate personal biases and increase the study's reliability.

Researchers are responsible for mitigating bias and avoiding viewing data through a personal lens in the study. I used bracketing, journaling, and member checking to mitigate bias and prevent viewing data through a personal lens. Bracketing involves researchers considering their personal experience, cultural factors, or assumptions that may affect or influence how they view the data collected (McNarry et al., 2019). I used journaling to track all activities related to data collection, transcript validation and review, member checking, the interview protocol (see [Appendix](#)), and data saturation. I conducted member checking to mitigate personal biases and increase the study's reliability. Researchers also use interview protocols to mitigate bias during data collection using semistructured interviews. I used the precode book for the analysis process to present bias-free results.



The interview protocol (see [Appendix](#)) included seven questions with probing follow-up questions and guided the interviews. I used the interview protocol to avoid any form of bias for the reliability of the study while collecting rich data. Noman et al. (2018) and Yeong et al. (2018) recommended that researchers use an interview protocol to guide them in avoiding personal bias during data collection and collecting comprehensive data within the time allocated. Barrett and Twycross (2018) also asserted that following interview protocol rules and guidelines decreases inconsistencies when conducting semistructured interviews. I recorded the responses from the participants and took notes during each interview. I used two audio recording devices after one of my first devices malfunctioned and stopped recording the initial interview.

### **Participants**

The participants were three SME leaders who had implemented sustainability strategies to remain in business beyond 5 years in Rivers State, Nigeria. I chose participants based on the following criteria: (a) SME leaders who had managed a business successfully, (b) SMEs with between 10 and 50 employees, (c) SMEs that had been in existence for more than 5 years, (d) SME leaders who were above the age of 21 years, (e) SME leaders who understood the phenomenon under study, and (f) SME leaders who were available during the data collection period. In a qualitative multiple case study, a researcher selects participants based on their knowledge and ability to answer the main research question (Yin, 2018). I recruited more participants than needed for the study and used the criteria above to gather relevant data. I obtained IRB approval

06-02-22-0330437 for data collection, after which I contacted the selected participants by email.

My strategy for gaining access to participants in my environment involved relationships with SME leaders operating in Rivers State. Vuban and Eta (2019) suggested that researchers become familiar with gatekeepers to gain access to leaders. I contacted the participants through email and requested that they send me their telephone numbers. The participants were not accessible due to Covid-19 restrictions, limiting access to email, telephone, WhatsApp, or Zoom calls. I scheduled a meeting with all participants. During this meeting, I shared and reviewed the informed consent form, explaining the purpose of the study, data collection process, participant selection criteria, voluntary participation disclosure, confidentiality procedures, and contribution to business practice for the selected organization. I answered any questions that participants had about the study.

As the researcher, I emailed the participants the documents for the research study. Kiernan et al. (2018) posited that researchers must communicate the research process to the selected participants to earn their trust and support. Successful communication helps build a relationship with trust and connection that begins a long-lasting, trusting relationship (Turaga, 2019). Participants received an invitation email in which I introduced myself and the informed consent form for their review. All participants were requested to respond by email within 3 days of receiving the invitation email with “I consent” to participate.

I developed a working relationship with the participants when I received a response with the informed consent form. I established a working relationship by conducting an introductory phone call with the participants. Anderson (2017) inferred that a working relationship with the participants is imperative to the success of qualitative research. For a researcher, building rapport is an integral part of gaining a participant's trust to have an open and honest dialogue (Cassell et al., 2020). During this meeting, I shared and reviewed the informed consent form. I explained the purpose of the study, disclosure of voluntary participation, disclosure of confidentiality procedures, and contribution to business practice for the selected organization. I answered any questions that the participants had about the study. I then followed up with the eligible participants to schedule an appointment for the interview.

In addition, I informed the participants of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time. I also told them that their identity and the data would be confidential and protected. I conducted member checking with the participants after the interview to ensure that my interpretation of the interview was accurate. Transcripts, notes, and research data were labeled and tracked by participant number, and I stored the files on an electronic storage device.

### **Research Method and Design**

Researchers choose a research method and design based on their need to address their problem and purpose statements and answer research questions. Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018) asserted that researchers select methods and designs to address a research

strategy, such as answering the research question set by the researcher (Blair et al., 2019; Mohajan, 2018). After carefully considering the available research methods and designs and the need to answer the research question (What sustainability strategies do SME leaders use to remain in business beyond 5 years?), I selected the qualitative research method and multiple case study design, which involves collecting, evaluating, and reporting data to understand participants' experiences and actions.

### **Research Method**

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are the three methods for conducting a research study (Blair et al., 2019; Rahi, 2017; Sykes et al., 2018). Awasthy (2019) defined qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed informants' views, conducted in a natural setting. Researchers use the qualitative method to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences by gathering and interpreting data (Clark & Vealé, 2018; Kegler et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). The qualitative method is used to understand participants' experiences and feelings on social or human phenomena, as deduced from analyzed statements.

Qualitative methods also give insight into participant experiences and feelings. Clark and Vealé (2018) and Queirós et al. (2017) posited that researchers use the qualitative method to obtain data from participants about personal experiences by communicating freely and expressing feelings about the phenomenon. Researchers also use the qualitative method for identifying themes derived from data collected from

participants (Mohajan, 2018). The qualitative approach helped in identifying themes from the data collected during participants' engagement to look at similarities and pertinent factors.

The qualitative approach leads to understanding how participants react, feel, and express themselves. Yin (2018) shared that a qualitative study has four elements: (a) the desire to attain an in-depth understanding of participants in a particular setting; (b) the capability to cultivate a thorough, detailed depiction of the phenomenon under exploration; (c) the ability to discover and address indefinable phenomena such as thinking, beliefs, and reasoning; and (d) the desire to build up an investigative phenomenon (Lanka et al., 2021). I used a qualitative approach to identify SME leaders' sustainability strategies that sustained their businesses beyond 5 years.

A quantitative method was not suitable for this study. Stockemer (2019) mentioned that researchers collect data through surveys to test hypotheses in quantitative research. Goertzen (2017) shared that the researcher generalizes findings to a larger population through an objective process in a quantitative study. Queirós et al. (2017) noted that data collected through surveys administered to a sample or an entire population allow a researcher to generalize or make inferences. A quantitative approach was unsuitable for this research study because I did not gather data using surveys or hypotheses.

In a mixed-method study, a researcher collects and analyzes qualitative and quantitative data in a single study. Researchers who conduct mixed-methods analysis

have an in-depth understanding of qualitative and quantitative methods (Almeida, 2018). Mixed methods research relies upon the idea of heightened understanding through methodological triangulation (Turner et al., 2017). Problems often occur during data analysis and the interpretation process of quantitative and mixed-methods studies (Doyle et al., 2019). Complications may arise when theories and methods are neither distinct nor significant (Yin, 2018). Doyle et al. (2019) declared that mixed-methods studies include computing large samples and testing the research's credibility, transferability, and accuracy. A mixed-methods approach was unsuitable because the current study did not involve the examination of relationships between variables.

### **Research Design**

I considered several qualitative research designs: case study, ethnography, narrative, and phenomenological. Qualitative research designs include case study, ethnography, narrative, and phenomenological design but are not limited to the methods listed (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lanka et al., 2021; Mohajan, 2018). A case study design can be a single case design when a researcher works with a single participant or a multiple case study involving more than one participant (Yin, 2018). When researchers choose a single case over a multiple-case design, five rationales might apply; the single case may be (a) critical, (b) unusual, (c) common, (d) revelatory, or (e) longitudinal (Yin, 2018). There is a commonality among the cases in a multiple case study, enabling researchers to analyze and find replicable differences or similar contexts (Tomaszewski

et al., 2020). I used a qualitative multiple case study to review open-ended questions and gather data to give a holistic view of the phenomenon.

An ethnographic qualitative research design involves interpreting a given culture or subculture by studying cultural group beliefs and interactions. Gergen and Gergen (2018) described an ethnographic design as providing an objective account of life in the group under consideration. The researcher in ethnographic design is embedded within the culture and creates a firsthand account of the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of the individuals in the group (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). I did not intend to study a given culture or belief; therefore, an ethnographic design was unsuitable for this study.

A phenomenological research design involves interpreting the lived experience of participants. The phenomenological researcher focuses on personal meaning and the relationship between a person and the world (Alase, 2017). Larkin et al. (2019) posited that phenomenological design gives an in-depth view of participants' personal experiences and views. However, I did not seek to interpret participants' lived experiences, making the research design unsuitable for my research.

A narrative research design aims at an individual's meaning of an adventure through storytelling. The narrative research approach exposes the relationship between the words within one or multiple texts and the relationship between text and social reality (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019). An essential consideration for narrative is that the story has some event or experience that has caused a change within the person or specific situation (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019). A narrative study can involve a single participant, as in

biographical research or autoethnography, or several people who share everyday experiences using oral history. Most often, the narrative approach is in the process of identity construction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A narrative design was not the best for this study because I did not seek to tell the life stories of the business leaders who participated.

I want to explore and understand participants' sustainability strategies in operating their businesses past 5 years using open-ended and semistructured interview questions. I collected data by interviewing participants using the seven interview questions to explore the phenomenon. After the interviews, member checking was done to ensure I correctly interpreted participants' views and no new words emerged. If any new word appeared during member checking, I selected another participant and continued the interview until I reached data saturation. Data saturation during member checking and interpretation of data is vital in qualitative research.

Data saturation is the point in the study where no new information is found. After the initial participants' interview, there is enough information to answer the research question. I conducted follow-up interviews to review my interpretations, make corrections, address any new data emerging during the follow-up interviews, and collect organizational documents. I performed follow-up member checking interviews with each participant. I conducted the member checking process with each participant to (a) review my interpretation of the interview responses, (b) provide the participant with the interview question with my interpretation for their review, and (c) provide the participant



with an electronic copy of my interpretation, and (d) ask the participant to confirm my interpretation accurately represents their responses to the interview questions and allow them to provide any additional information. I conducted member checking with each participant until no new information emerged, themes began to materialize, and additional interviews were unnecessary, signifying data saturation.

### **Population and Sampling**

The sample size for this qualitative multiple case study was three small business leaders in River State, Nigeria, who successfully implemented sustainability strategies to remain in business beyond 5 years. The SME leaders gathered rich and quality data from different industry sectors. Small sample sizes are appropriate for qualitative research to help support the depth of case-oriented analysis (Vasileiou et al., 2018). A sample size of three to six cases is appropriate for case study research (Boddy, 2016; Yin, 2018). Therefore, a sample size of three was suitable for this study. Data saturation was reached with two SME leaders, but I went ahead to interview the third leader for validity.

I used purposive sampling to select participants. Researchers use purposive sampling to choose target respondents based on the purpose and specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to yield appropriate and valuable information for the study (Adewumi & Ogunnubi, 2019; Campbell et al., 2020). A Researcher used purposive sampling to interact with the participants to get subjective data on their experiences and implementation. Researchers use various sampling techniques in a qualitative study, such as purposive sampling, random sampling, and snowball sampling (Ames et al., 2019;

Etikan & Bala, 2017). Snowball sampling is a recruitment strategy of using study participants to recruit other study participants (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). Snowball sampling was inappropriate for this study because participants would be selected based on specific prerequisite qualifications. The participants included in this study must be (a) SME leaders who have managed business successfully, (b) SMEs who have between ten to fifty employees, (c) SMEs whose enterprise has been in existence for more than 5 years, (d) SMEs leaders who are above the age of 21 years (e) SMEs who understand the phenomenon under study, and (f) SMEs that will be available during the data collection period.

Data saturation helped add transparency to the research. Reaching data saturation is critical for a qualitative researcher because it is the point to stop collecting data (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2019) stated that a researcher reaches data saturation when no new codes or patterns emerge. To ensure data saturation, I collected data until I saw repetition in the information and no new themes emerged.

I conducted all interviews using zoom video conferencing. Lobe et al. (2020) noted that the pandemic forced face-to-face qualitative data collection to transition to a “socially distant” method. Jongsma et al. (2020) suggested that study participants choose the location to conduct their interviews. The participants chose the date and time that was convenient for them. Ngozwana (2018) noted that researchers should keep study participants in their natural world. Using Zoom meeting and interview guidelines provided participants to reduce distractions, such as requiring them to be secluded or in a

quiet area with no distractions, no telephones, and children/family during the interview. Also, the interview guidelines included those participants who had access to a computer.

### **Ethical Research**

I followed the protocol for ethical research as noted by Walden and the Belmont report. Before interacting with participants, I gained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Walden IRB approval number is 06-02-22-0330437. Brittain et al. (2020) indicated that IRB gives guidelines and permission to do research based on the principles and procedures of research ethics, as stated by international bodies. I used the three principles of *The Belmont Report* to provide ethical standards to the participants. *The Belmont Report* is an ethical framework written and designed to protect the interview participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) described the three principles as (a) respect for the person, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice.

Respect for a person is the autonomy and protection given to a person of less privilege. Respect for persons expresses the fulfillment of at least three essential requirements: (a) the Institutional review board (IRB) must approve any human subjects research (b) participants in human subjects research must give their voluntarily explicit informed consent to participate, especially if any potential harm to subjects is expected, including minimal harm (c) vulnerable subjects such as prisoners and the incapacitated

should either be provided with sufficient additional protections or excluded from the research (Adashi et al., 2018; Al-Khatib, & Kalichman, 2019). After obtaining IRB approval to conduct the research, I emailed and received the informed consent from each participant via email. I assigned codes to protect participants' names and the organization and ensure participants understood how to withdraw from the study.

Researchers used informed consent to advise research participants of their rights. Beneficence is to carry out a risk-benefit analysis for the research "do no harm" and "maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms" (Adashi et al., 2018). Tangible and intangible incentives could encourage participants to participate in a research study (Stovel et al., 2018). Justice in human subjects research implies scrutinizing the research problems to ensure the participants selected are directly related to the problem studied (Al-Khatib, & Kalichman, 2019). Injustice occurs when denying the participant of benefit entitled without good reason or an unduly imposed burden (Adashi et al., 2018). *The Belmont report* principles guide the researcher against unethical standards.

As the researcher, I sought the consent of all participants for the study, protected their identity, and ensured confidentiality. Qualitative research requires a researcher to seek the consent of the participants and give an informed consent form to the prospective study participants (Ngozwana, 2018). I adhered to the three principles of *The Belmont report* guiding researchers from erring. Anabo et al. (2019) recommended using the three principles of *The Belmont report* to ensure my research met ethical standards. I provided

the informed consent form to each participant via email, and the participants returned the form to me via email.

The participants each received the informed consent form identifying the following: (a) background of the study, (b) purpose of the study, (c) research responsibilities, (d) risks and benefits associated with participating in this study, (e) information on the researcher, (f) process for ensuring confidentiality, and (g) role of the participant. Brittain et al. (2020) shared that a researcher must obtain permission from all possible participants. In the informed consent forms, I represented the participant using the alphanumeric symbols P1, P2, and P3 to remain anonymous. I informed the participants that all the information provided would remain confidential and that they were free to withdraw from the study. Brittain et al. (2020) and Josephson and Smale (2020) inferred that the researcher must inform the participants that participation was voluntary and provide complete confidentiality to interviewees. I included a statement letting each participant know that they may withdraw from the study by notifying me via email. I informed all participants of the study and their roles.

I informed participants of their roles and provided an overview of the study in the consent form. Brittain et al. (2020) stated that a researcher should provide each potential participant with an overview of the research study and define their role. I ensured ethical standards by following the steps for the credibility of the research. (a) I obtained IRB permission to conduct the research, (b) I commenced recruitment of the participants, emailed the participants an informed consent form, (c) requested that participants return

the informed consent forms via email, and (d) scheduled interviews once I receive the returned consent forms from the participants via email, (e) I maintained confidentiality, not divulging the names or identifying the participants or organizations participating in this research study using alphanumeric symbols or codes for each participant, (f) I stored the data for this research study in a password-protected file on my computer's external hard drive, (g) I provided each participant with a copy of the consent form, advising them of the risk benefits and informing them that this study remains secured with a personal password protected on my computer for the next 5 years once the study is complete. After 5 years, I will destroy all data by deleting electronic files from the computer. Walden's approval number for this study is 06-02-22-0330437, expiring in June 2023.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

I was the primary instrument for this qualitative multiple case study. Clark and Vealé (2018) and Wa-Mbaleka (2019) posited that researchers are the primary data collection instrument. Qualitative research involves collecting data through a semistructured interview with open-ended questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Researchers use interviews to gather detailed data regarding a particular phenomenon (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Semistructured interviews are where the interviewer explicitly asks about core elements of the phenomenon, ensuring data are captured in critical areas while allowing participants to bring their personalities and perspective to the discussion (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Yin, 2018). I collected data from the participants using an interview protocol containing semistructured interviews, open-ended questions,

and documents from the participant's organization. I interviewed the participants using the preset seven interview questions, recorded the audio, and took notes to capture all the participants' responses.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the study, I conducted member checking to confirm the researcher's interpretation of the participant responses. Scholars like Candela (2019) and Naidu and Prose (2018) described member checking as verifying data accuracy after data collection from the participants. Member checking is a way the researcher ensures the accurate portrayal of participant voices by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm or deny the accuracy and interpretations of data, thus adding credibility to the qualitative study. I performed member checking to ensure the accuracy of interpreted data I collected. I digitally recorded the interview, transcribed the data, and emailed the interpretation and the audio recording to the participants for member checking. I requested that the participants respond within 5-7 business days to the email.

### **Data Collection Technique**

I collected data using the interview protocol ([Appendix](#)) containing semistructured interviews, open-ended questions, employee handbooks, and end-of-year reports obtained from the participants. Barrett and Twycross (2018) posited that researchers use semistructured interviews to gather rich data on participants' experiences in a qualitative research study. The semistructured interview method collects open-ended data to explore particular topics and sensitive personal issues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Barrett and Twycross (2018) asserted that following interview protocol rules and

guidelines decrease inconsistencies when conducting semistructured interviews. I followed the interview protocol throughout the interview process while collecting data.

I followed the interview protocol outlined in the [Appendix](#) for each participant to guide my interviews. This type of interview with preset questions guides the researcher during the data collection (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). After the IRB approval, I selected three small business leaders identified from the \*internet\* to participate in the research study. I emailed the informed consent form to the participants. The participants returned their consent statements via email with the word I consent. Then, I scheduled a date and time to conduct interviews via Zoom audio over the internet.

During the Zoom interview, I followed each participant's procedure outlined in the interview protocol (see [Appendix](#)). I digitally recorded the semistructured interview audio with each participant. Correia et al. (2020) pointed out that digitally recording a consultation can help the researcher with reflexive observation. I obtained documents via email from the participants on strategies to sustain small businesses beyond 5 years.

Qualitative multiple case study researchers collect data from interviewing participants, archival records, and recordings. The known interview types are: (a) structured, (b) unstructured, and (c) semistructured. For this study, I used a semistructured interview. Heath et al. (2018) noted there are different options to conduct interviews, which can be (a) face to face, (b) online, or (c) by email. For this study, I adopted online teleconferencing with the participants. The participants may not allow face-to-face interviews because of COVID-19.



There are advantages and disadvantages to conducting semistructured interviews. Hernandez-Nino et al. (2022) stated that the advantage of face-to-face semistructured interviews is improving verbal and nonverbal communication with participants. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) described that another advantage was immediate interpretation and, therefore, the ability to obtain clarification of data not understood. Interactions with participants are necessary to explore successful sustainability strategies small business leaders use to operate beyond 5 years. The advantage of conducting a semistructured interview is checking with the participants for clarity on the data.

I conducted the interview online. Consequently, I selected a Zoom meeting audio-record semistructured interview method. Sah et al. (2020) shared that participants may be reluctant to share information in face-to-face interviews due to nervousness or hesitancy. Shepherd and Zacharakis (2018) implied that a researcher's time and money might conjointly be disadvantages of the interview method. To confront these drawbacks, I structured the interview for 45 to 60 minutes to collect the information required from the participants. The researcher has to take advantage of and avoid the disadvantage of a semistructured interview.

Semistructured interviews' advantages and disadvantages are critical points for the research. It is beneficial to the study because it enables an in-depth discussion of the participants. Interview questions are used in a semistructured interview to allow open-ended questions, which helps avoid bias and strengthens the quality of the study. An open-ended question helps capture detailed descriptive data on the phenomenon (Leko et

al., 2021). One of the disadvantages of the semistructured interview is that it takes commitment and concentration to list interview questions for data collection and to answer the research question on the phenomenon (Jayachandran et al., 2021). The questions are carefully selected to be helpful in the collection of data, and it can be time-consuming. To overcome this disadvantage, I started early, followed the interview protocol, reviewed the research questions, and carefully listed them for the study.

Another semistructured interview disadvantage is researcher bias during notetaking and the interpretation of the data. The researcher can be biased, having an opinion on the phenomenon. Such ideas could cause bias when taking notes during the interview, which would affect the interpretation of the data. One method to reduce bias is through member checking. Naidu and Prose (2018) suggested that member checking is a way for the researcher to ensure data accuracy by allowing participants to confirm or deny the correctness and interpretations of data, thus adding credibility to the qualitative study. I conducted member checking with the participant to ensure the validity and accuracy of the data.

As the researcher, I used member checking to ascertain the validity and accuracy of the data. Researchers used member checking to authenticate the correct data clarification and gain additional knowledge supporting different participant responses (Madill & Sullivan, 2018). Also, Thomas (2017) suggested that member checking improves the research by clarifying and correcting the researcher's interpretations before study conclusions. To ensure the reliability of the study, I performed methodological

triangulation by checking other records and documents of the organization and comparing them with the data collected during the interview to confirm these data and ensure data saturation.

Upon completion of the interviews, I transcribed the recordings into Word documents. I synthesized the participant answers for every question to conduct member checking. I discussed the main points of my summations with the participants. Then I emailed the summary to the participants for member checking. Each participant had 5 to 7 days to validate and make changes to their responses, per the guidance in the consent form. Membership checking gives validation of the researcher's transcript for each participant. I used member checking so that the participants could validate the interpretation of that data.

### **Data Organization Technique**

The qualitative data organization technique stores all the data gathered in one place. Good data management is necessary for file processes (Yin, 2018). I used Microsoft Excel to organize the data collected and Windows Explorer to maintain the data in separate electronic folders by naming each folder with the interviewee's unique identifier. I called data collected from primary and secondary sources separately and coded them anonymously using P1, P2, and P3, for the different participants on the electronic folders. I transcribed data collected from the online semistructured interviews.

Additionally, I used a reflexive journal to keep notes before, during, and after the interview. After transcription, I returned to the participants to check if the transcribed

information was appropriate. I requested that the participants give me time to collect data from the recordings during the interview for easy methodological triangulation and member checking notes. I kept the electronic data on a password-protected flash drive and my computer. All study records will be deleted or destroyed at the end of the 5 years.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis method for this qualitative multiple case study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is among the most used techniques to analyze qualitative data (Lehmann et al., 2019). Roberts et al. (2019) defined thematic analysis involves identifying particular themes to the research topic, question, setting, and theoretical framework. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that thematic analysis aids researchers in simplifying the description and categorization of the data as the base for further interpretations and theoretical developments. Researchers should use sound and respected data collection and analysis techniques to create trustworthiness for their readers (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Using the appropriate data analysis, I could exude trustworthiness in my research findings.

I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase analysis to analyze the data. Braun and Clarke recommended six steps in the thematic analysis: (a) familiarizing yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. I would use the phases identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) as follows:

**Phase 1**

I became familiar with the data. I immersed myself in the data by repeated readings to search for reappearing meanings and patterns. Nowell et al. (2017) noted that researchers must actively immerse themselves with the data to search for meanings and patterns. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) noted that when a researcher becomes familiar with the data, it allows for a more excellent grasp of the data. The repeated reading of the data will help aid in the formal coding process.

**Phase 2**

I developed initial codes from the data. I used the traditional method (working through hard copies of the transcripts with pens and highlighters) and (organizing and labeling data) to identify and generate initial codes. Nowell et al. (2017) stated that coding aided the researcher in streamlining and zeroing in on the data's specific attributes. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) noted that qualitative researchers use data analysis software to simplify the data analysis process, allowing for a more complex, profound data analysis. I used NVivo software to organize the data and discover themes and codes to understand the phenomenon.

**Phase 3**

I searched for emerging themes. I took the data I initially coded and grouped it into emerging themes according to similarity. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) indicated themes as a pattern that captures significant or interesting about the data and research question. Nowell et al. (2017) explained that initial coding begins to form main themes

and form subthemes. I arranged the coded data into main themes and subthemes. Through this process, I identified significant individual themes related to my research question.

#### **Phase 4**

I reviewed the themes and generated a thematic map. I studied and clarified the main themes and subthemes I developed in Phase 3. During this phase, a researcher should show how each theme originates from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) clarified that the researcher should have different themes, show how they fit well together, and summarize the data at the end of this phase. At the end of the phase, I had varying candidate themes and subthemes to summarize the data.

#### **Phase 5**

I defined and named themes. I described and labelled each theme during this phase. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that a researcher identified each theme's importance at this phase and determined the data aspect that each theme captures. Themes are patterns in codes that show a bigger picture of what is portrayed (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I reviewed each candidate theme and sub-theme to determine which one related to my research question.

#### **Phase 6**

I produced a report on the findings of the data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that a finding's write-up should be concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and give a complete account of that information within and across themes. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) noted that writing the conclusion responded to the research question. After

identifying the themes and thoroughly analyzing them, I composed an analytic narrative of the findings. I organized the data into main themes generated from the reviewed academic literature and conceptual framework to improve the data credibility by showing alignment.

Data collection from multiple sources is critical in qualitative studies.

Methodological triangulation is a strategy to enhance research validity by converging information from different sources (Clark & Vealé, 2018; Kern, 2018; Renz et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). Farquhar et al. (2020) noted that researchers who use a qualitative case study could gather data from multiple sources such as interviews, focus groups, and archival analysis. Methodological triangulation validates data and research by cross-verifying information from multiple data sources. Joslin and Müller (2016) identified the four kinds of triangulation: (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) methodological triangulation, and (d) theory triangulation. Methodological triangulation is the most used type (Hastings & Salkind, 2013; Joslin & Müller, 2016). I used methodological triangulation to strengthen the validity of my study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Qualitative researchers receive criticism for the perceived lack of robustness in qualitative studies. Belotto (2018) posited that reliability and validity in qualitative research are known as trustworthiness in a qualitative study. The study's dimensionality and richness enhance the findings, patterns, and sense-making words generated by the data (Rose & Johnson, 2020). To improve trustworthiness, which strengthens the study,

dependability, transferability, credibility, and confirmability, researchers can create protocol guides, such as audit trails and member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Cypress (2017) argued that researchers use rigor instead of trustworthiness because rigor builds into the study from the first contact to participants with constant reiteration and reassessment throughout the process rather than during the data analysis stage. I took various steps to ensure the reliability and validity of this study using the protocol guides of auditing and membership checking.

### **Reliability**

Qualitative research may be weighed based on reliability determined by duplicating procedures, findings, and validity using suitable methodologies and data. To achieve study reliability, the qualitative researcher should document all data creation, analysis, and interpretation steps in chronological order (Nowell et al., 2017). Implementing interview protocols, member checking, and methodological triangulation will enhance the study's dependability.

### ***Dependability***

I used member checking to address dependability. Researchers can attain dependability by ensuring that the study process is rational, traceable, and well documented (Nowell et al., 2017). After obtaining IRB approval, I conducted interviews utilizing a protocol. After the interviews, participants had an opportunity to review my interpretation during the member checking and provide any edits. According to Candela (2019), member checking is necessary to avoid researcher bias throughout the analysis



and interpretation of study findings. Maintaining an audit trail of researcher notes and the doctorate committee reviewing the data collection instruments are two reliability procedures. I maintained a reflective journal to track the study's progress, relevant information on the participants, and any difficulties that may have long-term consequences. I used member checking to improve the consistency of the findings.

### **Validity**

Validity is based on the study's credibility, trustworthiness, dependability, and transferability. Researchers build credibility through observation, member checking, and triangulation with research (Johnson et al., 2020). The validity of my research will be primarily ensured by the data gathering procedures that I employed and recorded in the study.

### ***Credibility***

I conducted member checking, used methodological triangulation, and maintained a reflexive journal to ensure credibility. Credibility ensured that the study's findings reflect reality (Constantinou et al., 2017). Member checking is a strategy researchers use for establishing credibility because participants can review the researcher's interpretation of the data for accuracy (Xerri, 2018). Researchers use triangulation to create credibility in qualitative research by using multiple data sources to ensure that the research study's data, analysis, and conclusions are accurate (Moon, 2019). Using methodological triangulation aids researchers in validating the data, brings rigor to the study, and increases credibility (Battaglio & Hall, 2018). Trainor and Bundon (2021) noted that

researchers use reflexive journals to understand and analyze participants' answers. I used member checking, a reflexive journal, and methodological triangulation to ensure the credibility of my study.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability is the transfer of knowledge from one context to another context. Transferability relates to transferring the study results to other situations and individuals (Constantinou et al., 2017). A study's transferability occurs when the findings from a qualitative study can transfer to another setting or under other conditions (Monsen & Van Horn, 2008; Xerri, 2018). Xerri (2018) noted that transferability occurs by providing a thick description that can enable researchers to consider if a transfer to another context is possible. To ensure the transferability of this study, I offered a thick and rich description of the study's findings that may be helpful to business executives in comparable situations.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability consists of the extent to which other researchers can review the study's data to confirm the results of a research study to get the same results. Xerri (2018) explained that an audit trail could enhance the confirmability of a study. A comprehensive audit trail requires specific information about the data and data analysis to be recorded and, through transparency, can increase the study's trustworthiness (Carcary, 2020; Xerri, 2018). An audit trail should include in detail: the research design, data collection and analysis, data sources, and the findings (Carcary, 2020). To ensure the

confirmability of my study, I provided an audit trail of the research design, data collection and analysis, data sources, and findings.

### ***Data Saturation***

Data saturation is used to calculate sample size in qualitative research. A researcher has achieved data saturation when no new information develops (Constantinou et al., 2017). Qualitative researchers must select the appropriate sample size. Choosing a sample size aims to yield rich data to understand the researched phenomenon (Hennink et al., 2019). Boddy (2016) indicated that a 3 to 6 sample size is appropriate if it sufficiently describes the researched phenomenon and answers the research question. I interviewed study participants until no new data was developed and no new themes emerged.

### **Transition and Summary**

Section 2 restated the purpose statement and defined my researcher role. The synopsis of the different research methods and designs and how I selected the applicable method and design for the study were provided. In addition, a comprehensive account of participants' sample size and ethical research detailing the participants' selection criteria, the appropriate sample size for the study, and the guidelines I followed in conducting ethical research. Maintaining ethical values in research entails safeguarding both the research's integrity and the safety of study participants. The data collection is integral to the research. I described how the data would be collected, noting that I would serve as the primary data collection instrument. During data collection, the researcher's attention to detail, searching for further explanations, and subjectivity play a role in the analysis

process. During the interview, I used member checking to ensure that correct and trustworthy data was obtained. The study's logical and sequential data analysis procedure and the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program (NVivo) I utilized to handle data were detailed. I concluded section 2, describing the data reliability and validity, critical components in proving research quality. The research topic, analysis, explanation of my findings, and comments on how my findings confirm, disconfirm, or advance knowledge in the field are all included in Section 3. Section 3 is an overview of an application to professional practice, concerns for social change implications, a conclusion of actionable recommendations, more research, reflections, and a summary and conclusion of the study.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the sustainability strategies that SME leaders used to remain in business beyond 5 years in Rivers State. Prasanna et al. (2019) stressed the high failure rate of SMEs 5 years from conception. Because of this unfavorable effect, sustainability strategies are significant for SME leaders to survive in business (Islam et al., 2022). Rahman et al. (2022) emphasized that sustainability strategy is a substantial component of SME business survival. SME leaders must develop effective sustainability strategies to remain in business beyond 5 years and maintain business continuity.

I used thematic analysis of participants' feedback, insight, and experiences to determine themes and codes. Data for this study came from leaders' interviews and company documents such as annual reports and employee handbooks from three SMEs in Rivers State. The analysis resulted in three primary themes: (a) strategic management, (b) application of business strategies, and (c) strategic business processes used by SME leaders to influence the ability to remain in business beyond 5 years. Included in this section is the presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, the implications for social change, and my recommendations for action. I conclude with my recommendations for further research and personal reflections on the study.

## Presentation of the Findings

### Participant Overview

This qualitative research study addressed the following question: What sustainability strategies do SME leaders use to sustain businesses beyond 5 years? I conducted semistructured interviews via Zoom with three SME leaders operating in Rivers State to answer the research question. I assigned codes to each participant (P1, P2, and P3) instead of names so as not to reveal their identifying information. The SME leaders provided strategies, insights, and experiences in response to the open-ended questions, explaining how they implemented strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Company documents reviewed included the annual report and employee handbook. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six analysis phases to analyze data into themes and patterns. I used NVivo software to organize and analyze the collected data. I identified three primary themes through an analysis of data collected from the three SME leaders: (a) strategic management, (b) stakeholder management strategies, and (c) strategic business processes. Table 1 displays the themes and the participants whose responses contributed to the found themes. All three participants talked about the three themes recognized in this study.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Emergent Themes and Participant Acknowledgment*

Description of themes	Occurrence
Leaders used strategic management	P1, P2, P3
Leaders used stakeholder management strategies	P1, P2, P3
Leaders used strategic business processes	P1, P2, P3

### **Theme 1: Strategic Management**

Strategic management plays a significant role in the sustainability of SME businesses. Agwu (2018) disclosed that strategic management involves directing business activities, allocating resources, supporting key objectives and decisions, and enhancing performance for sustainable competitive advantages. Leaders should communicate, be flexible, and focus on resources and outcomes in business. Strategic management includes examining internal resources and external environments to provide overall direction to management and business leaders to achieve business goals (Fauzi et al., 2021). The primary benefit of leaders exhibiting strategic management is that it encourages SME employees to increase their ability and knowledge to contribute more to the enterprise. In turn, employees develop innovative and uncommon ways to solve business problems. Strategic management is a continuous process of developing and implementing business strategies to maintain an effective, functioning business in changing environments.

All participants (i.e., P1, P2, and P3) owed their success to suitable leadership styles. All participants described themselves as leaders who liked to get the work done by creating good working conditions for their employees. Leaders are influential and inspiring when they use motivating language to communicate with their employees and “walk the talk.” Enterprise leaders who lack proper education and resources to lead their employees as a team demonstrate poor strategic management skills. The emergent subthemes of strategic management were (a) leadership, (b) access to finance and

financial management, and (c) entrepreneurship.

### ***Leadership***

The interviews indicate that SME leaders have different leadership styles in enterprises. Being influential, inspiring, visionary, motivational, and transparent and having an open line of communication with employees are essential in getting the best from employees. In relation to leadership style, P1 stated,

“I have realized that every leader has a different leadership style”. “I like to communicate with my team that we are all on the same page with the same goal and a win for one is a win for all”. “I like to recognize the value the team bring and engage with my employees”. “I always socialize with the staff with a vision and inspiration toward our goal”. I want them to feel [comfortable] that I care about them”.

P2 mentioned, “We motivate, inspire, and involve all staff as stakeholders. Operate an ownership style, open communication, and problem-solving. Every staff challenge is a concern to the enterprise.”

P3 shared, “We have an inclusive culture, that every team member essential”. “We respectfully discuss issues, seeking ideas and solutions from the staff for every blocker that comes our way”. “We have to influence by inspiring, valuing, and respecting our team; it has helped us keep them and their contributions growing daily”. “We also compensate and provide welfare packages to the staff, promoting excellent staff for their contributions”.



Balasubramaniam et al. (2021) and Manzoor et al. (2019) posited that the SME leadership style enhances employee job performance, advancing social and economic contributions to society. Northouse (2019) and Yue et al. (2019) postulated that transformational leaders motivate their employees and encourage their followers to do more than expected. Transformational leadership is considered a central leadership style that influences individual and organizational outcomes to achieve competitive advantage (Afriyie et al., 2019; Astuty & Udin, 2020). The transformational leadership style in SMEs fosters the innovative nature of employees to solve problems and gain a competitive advantage. At the same time, the transactional leadership style involves values relevant to exchange processes, such as honesty, responsibility, and reciprocity (Achmad & Fitriansyah, 2021; Alharbi, 2021). All participants exhibited both transformational and transactional leadership styles.

#### **Connection to the Conceptual Framework.**

The alignment of the leadership subtheme supports Afriyie et al.'s (2019) findings that leaders who exhibit the transformative style offer individual development; present a dream of clear, reciprocal vision; and accelerate creative thinking by employees, which improves individual and enterprise performance. Mamabolo et al. (2019) noted that the transformational leadership style is an intangible resource to achieve competitive advantage and enterprise performance. Transactional leadership aligns with RBV theory because innovation is a company strategy to boost performance and gain a competitive advantage. Feranita et al.'s (2020) findings that transactional leadership influences

enterprise innovation support the above view. Ur Rehman et al. (2019) also noted that transactional leaders develop an innovative SME culture. The leadership style adopted by SME leaders determines profitability, sustainability, and survival in a dynamic business environment (Jabeen, 2022). Participants P1, P2, and P3 exhibited transformational and transactional leadership styles aligning with the literature review and the conceptual framework. The findings for this subtheme appear to answer the research question.

### ***Access to Finance and Financial Management***

Access to finance and financial management resources is a critical strategy for business longevity and sustainability. All three interviewed participants mentioned access to monetary funds and financial management as an essential strategy that small business leaders in their respective industries used to sustain their businesses over 5 years. Umadia and Kasztelnik (2020) posited that small business leaders with access to finance are more likely to achieve business success and sustainability. P1 said, “the initial startup capital was from my family's savings, friends' support, and proper bookkeeping helped me to prevent losses. Business money is for the business.” P2 mentioned, that she started her business with money from her savings, family, and friends. “All spending must be appropriated, and there is no loose cash”. P3 stated, “I got offers for invoice discounting from commercial banks, lost value to banks, to be in business. I do financial planning; if it's not budgeted for no spending, every spending needs to be appropriated.”

All three participants said that financial management was one of their critical success factors. P1 mentioned “cost-saving, eliminating waste, and looking for cheaper

ways of doing things. In financial literacy, we saved and reinvested to grow the business.” P2 said, “profit-sharing was delayed in stabilizing the company. We paid back soft loans and reinvested our proceeds for the early years.” P3 said, “We follow accounting principles, everybody must account for every flow of cash in or out, our balance sheet is up to date, and we used balanced score card helps to stay transparent”.

### **Connection to Conceptual Framework.**

Small business leaders with access to monetary funds possess a valuable and rare resource due to the relatively high cost of starting and running a business. Ranabahu and Wickramasinghe (2022) supported that small business leaders use funds from internal funding and microfinance institutions to buy assets and start their firms or ventures, which aligns with the conceptual framework. Mafundu and Mafini (2019) posited that SME leaders venture into business to make a profit that allows them to sustain their business over the long term. Mafundu and Mafini’s comments aligned with the conceptual framework, which indicated that to create and maintain profitability in a competitive market, SMEs require unique, rare, and inimitable strategies that aligns with VRIN resources in RBV theory.

Small business leaders have individual-specific resources that facilitate recognizing new opportunities and assembling resources for their business. These specific resources became clear when P3 mentioned that he always tried to form relationships with other business leaders to understand how different business leaders operate and create those lasting relationships. The three participants exhibited “cost-

saving drives”, and “profit-sharing was delayed for some years”. All participants used cheaper ways to deliver on the business promise, and applied financial management strategies like budgeting, accounting principles, balanced scorecard, and annual financial reporting. All these strategies aligned with VRIN resources in RBV theory to gain competitive advantage and sustain business. The findings for this subtheme also answered the research question.

### ***Entrepreneurship***

Entrepreneurship is a complex activity involving various talents, abilities, and skills characterized by different performance outcomes to create value and profit. Entrepreneurship is a creative act of gathering all existing resources to create new wealth (Lee & Kim, 2019). Entrepreneurship enhances social transformation, economic growth, the supply of services, and new products by stimulating creativity and producing innovative ideas (Cardella et al., 2021). P1 said, “my entrepreneurship skills helped me to establish the organization, and my family was willing to support me to get out of their claws and be independent.” P2 stressed, “I took the risk that there was a gap to be filled by my ideas and concept in the industry would yield money.” P3 said, “risk-taking is the brain of entrepreneurship because of the entire process’s dynamics.” All participants (P1, P2, & P3) had graduate degrees, which connected with competence for entrepreneurship leading to their sustainability. P1 said, “am a graduate of chemical engineering and masters degree project management ”. P2 mentioned, “I have a degree in environmental science and masters in business administration” P3 shared, I am graduate of building

engineering, with a post graduate and masters in transport management”.

### **Connection to Conceptual Framework.**

Aligning competitive advantage as an output of RBV theory was supported by Aidara et al.'s (2021) and Jin and Lee's (2020) findings that entrepreneurship offers a competitive advantage to the SME through risky decisions that pay off in developing innovative products, services, and markets in a complex managerial environment and moving proactively to dominate a competitive market. SME business leaders create value for society and the government through entrepreneurship. SME leaders leveraged on opportunities, innovations, risk-taking, and efficient use of resources, to create millions of jobs for citizens, and as well gained return on investment for the business owners, which generates revenue for the government through taxes, and thus economic growth for the state. All the above mentioned strategies aligned with VRIN resources in RBV theory. The findings for this subtheme also appear to answer the research question.

### **Theme 2: Stakeholder Management Strategies**

Stakeholder management strategies include customer satisfaction and community relationships (corporate social responsibility). Pedrini and Ferri (2018) postulated that stakeholder management (SM) focuses on how firms can build and organize relationships with different stakeholders to improve their ability to respond to their expectations and gain a competitive advantage. Laplume et al. (2021) argued that profit maximization is not the sole objective of business activity; however, a balance of stakeholders' expectations is identified as the necessary condition for the survival and success of the

firm in the mid- to long term. Stakeholder management connects to a firm's performance that is having awareness of the stakeholders' interests that will affect business objectives and continuity.

### ***Customer Satisfaction and Community Relationship***

The subthemes were customer satisfaction, retention, and corporate social responsibility strategies. Customer satisfaction and loyalty cannot be separated from the quality of service (Juanamasta et al., 2019). Customers are essential in any business concerning the sale of the business. Al Idrus et al. (2021) postulated that customer satisfaction is vital for SMEs to realize long-term survival and business sustainability. Adapting appropriate corporate community strategies is vital for SME business sustainability in a complex and competitive business environment. Gibson et al. (2021) and Das et al. (2020) suggested that corporate community collaboration is an SME sustainability strategy. Small business leaders make significant leaps in their thinking, leading to innovative ideas that are not always linear but fact based toward sustainability. P1 explained, “My customers are my number one priority. I want them to keep coming back and spread the word so that when they come in, I give them all the attention and will do all I can to ensure I meet their needs”. “We give the host community a quota during employment, and the community was given the act of refusal in any employment opportunities.”

P2 stated, that “Customer satisfaction was achieved with the cooperation of other small business leaders in the same industry. Cooperation with neighboring business

leaders is also a strategy to remove competition and retain customers”. “We provided amenities for the community like hospital buildings and expanding the market stores, renovating six classrooms at the community high school, as our CSR programs”.

P3 said, “I have always gone the extra mile to satisfy my customers; if a customer asks for a service and I do not have it, I go to my neighbor as if I’m taking the supplies from my hotel.” P3 explained, “We meet the community at the midpoint on every demand. We proactively train the community youths on skills to prepare them for industry employment and partner with them on security and surveillance.”

#### **Connection to Conceptual Framework.**

The ability to maintain customer satisfaction and community relationships is related to RBV, as it can only be successful when the intangible skill is unique and not easily imitable. Barney (1991) and Hu and Kee's (2021) findings supported that SME leaders should select the method that best utilizes their internal resources relevant to external opportunities to achieve sustainable competitive advantage that aligns with customer satisfaction and community relationships. Islam et al. (2021) suggest an RBV conceptual model aligning firms' interest in CSR initiatives to satisfy community customers and gain competitive advantage. Barney (1991) postulated that RBV theory discusses the company's internal resources, abilities, and relationship with strategic decision-making. CSR, customer satisfaction, and customer retention strategies create lasting impact in the quality of life for communities and simultaneously generate business value for the company in community support, reputational benefits, risk reduction on

business continuity, productivity gains, competitive advantage, and sustainability. The findings for this theme and subthemes also appear to answer the research question.

### **Theme 3: Strategic Business Processes**

The third theme, strategic business processes, refers to a sustainable, purposeful set of interconnected activities that, using a specific technology, to transforms inputs or resources into value outputs to consumers. These business processes subthemes include human resource management, digitalization, inventory management, innovation, and capacity building.

The subthemes are interconnected and reviewed together. Capacity building is an intentional process by which individuals and organizations obtain, improve, and retain the skills, knowledge, tools, equipment, and other resources needed to do their jobs competently. All participants expressed the importance of capacity building, human resource management, digitalization, innovation, and inventory management.

Specifically, it is essential to recognize that overall strategic business processes are often created by taking several strategies and resources that each could be copied and bundling them together (Busby, 2019; Fletcher-Brown et al., 2021). Implementing the elements of the strategic business processes answers the research question.

P1 said, "I used strategies to create employee-focused human resource management, inventory management, digitalization, innovation, and capacity building that will be difficult for other small business leaders to implement". P1 mentioned, "Proper human resource and inventory management were essential to determine the



organization's future direction". P1 mentioned, "I had to implement an electronic inventory management system to allow proper accounting for inventory. Through innovation, we sourced alternate electricity power to have a constant power supply". "Training was conducted both on the job and externally for the employee to close competence gaps and refresh".

P2 mentioned that "Extensive training of employees was significant in building the company's brand". "We offered weekly, quarterly, and yearly training to close the gaps of specific staff and to grow the organization competence". "Training is specific to the needs of the individual and the organization's goals". P2 mentioned, "The cost of running diesel generators increased as we don't have constant electricity". "We went for solar and inverters to provide electricity". "Inventory management kept the business, reducing staff wastage and value". "We grew in experience with resources and could appropriate the correct quantity of materials and release them to accomplish the task". "Digitalizing the inventory management processes helped us reduce costs and meet clients' needs". "The accounting system was more visible and more accessible with digitalization".

P3 explained, "We eliminated all sorts of waste and maximized the use of human resources". "Admin staff doubles for other functions". "Our staff are well trained and can compete favorably in the industry". "Digitalization was the switch in the right direction. It helped us monitor real-time progress and determine what area needs more support to keep the business". "Innovation was not left out as we creatively sorted for ways to solve

clients' issues and reduce costs". "During the pandemic, we introduced no contact services with our clients but met the daily need of their services".

### **Connection to Conceptual Framework.**

Small business leaders who wish to achieve long-term competitive advantages should place a premium on nurturing and developing their firms' strategic resources to sustain their businesses for the future. The alignment of the subthemes to the theory is supported by Aidara et al. (2021) and Zizile and Tendai (2018) findings that successful organizations must develop strategies based on owned resources, such as human resources management, human capital development, digitalization, and material assets management, to achieve a competitive advantage. Sun et al. (2022) noted that digitalization helps visualize activities and resources such as employee skills and innovativeness through training programs, enhancing business performance, and achieving sustainability. Strategies built around owned unique resources align with RBV theory and possess valuable, rare, difficult-to-imitate, and nonsubstitutable resources. The findings for this final theme also appear to answer the research question.

### **Relevance to the Literature**

The data analysis emerged with three themes to answer the research question: What sustainability strategies do SME leaders use to remain in business beyond 5 years? The themes were strategic management with subthemes of leadership, access to funds, financial management, and entrepreneurship. The second theme was the stakeholder management strategies with subthemes of customer satisfaction and community

relationships, and the third theme was strategic business processes with subthemes of human resource management, innovation, digitalization, inventory management, and capacity building. The response from the SME leaders' indicated that these strategies were used to sustain their businesses over 5 years. The themes aligned with the peer-reviewed research presented in the literature review.

The first emerging theme was strategic management aligned with the literature review. The findings confirmed that SME leaders implementing strategic management achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. Anyoso and Mang'ana's (2022) findings confirmed that strategic management is a complex and participative technique used in scanning the business environment for the formation of organizational mission, vision, strategies, and tactics to improve organizational performance for competitiveness and survival of the firms. Ekon and Isayas (2022) also confirmed that SMEs must be engaged in strategic management practice because their survival and success in the business environment depend significantly on their strategic design and implementation viability. Strategic management in this study entailed leadership style, access to finance, financial management, and entrepreneurship.

The strategic management theme has subthemes: leadership style, access to finance, financial management, and entrepreneurship. Qadir and Yeşiltaş (2020) aligned with the subtheme that the leadership style used within an organization produces the best-fit outcomes through resource maximization, improving organizational performance, and sustainability. Babajide et al. (2021) findings also aligned with accessing appropriate

finance at a different developmental stage of business requires relevant knowledge and skill to navigate the financial market using a suitable financial product. Alvarez and Barney's (2020) findings aligned with the subtheme and confirmed entrepreneurship as individuals' discovery and exploit profit opportunities independently because of market imperfections. Organizational leaders who implemented strategic management strategies contribute to their firms' increased profitability and sustainability beyond 5 years.

The second emerging theme is the stakeholder management strategies aligned with the literature review. The findings confirmed that SME leaders' who applied stakeholder management strategies achieves sustainability beyond 5 years. Al Idrus et al. (2021) finding confirmed that customer satisfaction is vital for SMEs to achieve long-term business sustainability. Rizan et al. (2020) findings also supported SMEs maintaining customer satisfaction leads to business sustainability. The literature confirmed customer satisfaction as a business strategy that SME leaders must apply to achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. Firms have explored corporate social responsibility as a community relations practice to gain a business continuity, competitive advantage and sustainability. Islam et al. (2021) findings aligned with firms' interest in CSR initiatives to satisfy community customers and gain a competitive advantage confirming the literature relevance. Leaders who apply these business strategies contribute to their firms' increased competitive advantage and sustainability beyond 5 years.

The third emerging theme, strategic business processes, also aligned with the literature review. The findings confirmed that SME leaders' used strategic business

processes to achieve sustainability beyond 5 years. To achieve business sustainability, the SME leaders communicated the importance of ensuring human resources management, capacity building, inventory management, innovation, and digitalization processes (Hameed et al., 2021b). Borodako et al. (2022) finding confirmed the alignment to the literature review, that human resource management, creativity, and employee knowledge is a strategic business process context. Human resources management consist of employees who are one of the fundamental pillars of the organization. SME leaders who exhibit excellent human resource management and capacity-building practice contribute to their firms' increased uniqueness and sustainability beyond 5 years.

Gaining a competitive advantage and sustaining it depends on capacity development and the performance of employees. Philbin et al. (2022) confirmed that digitalization helps SMEs attain business sustainability by inherently addressing circular economy principles and sustainable VRIN resources. Proper inventory management reduces waste, decreases the overall cost for SMEs, and increases profitability while keeping customers happy (Blum, 2020). The SME leaders know that waste reduction through digitalization and inventory management contributes to profitability and sustainability. The SME leaders' comments aligned with the extant literature explaining the significance of digitalization, innovation, inventory management, human resource management, and capacity-building on profitability and sustainability.

### **Application to Professional Practice**

The findings could be significant to professional practice applications in the SME

industry. Moreover, the results of this study support existing literature on strategies implemented by SME leaders in achieving sustainability. Understanding what strategies are needed to outcompete rivals will help small business leaders develop feasible sustainability plans (Głodowska, 2019; Johansson et al., 2020). This study has highlighted the main strategies for SME sustainability as strategic management, stakeholder management strategies, and strategic business processes. It was evident that the firms' intangible and tangible resources were fundamental for small business leaders' ability to sustain business operations for over 5 years. Intangible resources included leadership, customer satisfaction, community relations, access to finance, financial management, digitalization, capacity-building inventory, and human resource management.

The leaders in the study supplied examples of leadership, customer satisfaction, community relations, and financial management. The different outlooks on leadership, customer satisfaction, community relations, and financial management may help new entrant SMEs to sustain their business. RBV theory asserts that organizations can outperform their competitors by developing unique and diverse resources, leading to differences in organizational performance among companies in a similar industry (Hameed et al., 2021a). RBV theory confirmed that the finding in this study, strategic management, stakeholder management strategies, and strategic business processes are intangible resources that can result in a desirable outcome for the organization, which in this study is organizational profitability and sustainability.

Based on the research result, strategic management signifies influencing competitive advantage leading to the firm's sustainability. Engert et al. (2016) noted that strategic management is doing things differently or better than competitors and in a way that typically lowers costs or better serves customer needs, giving rise to some form of competitive advantage and sustainability. When SME leaders feel their strategies are working and keeping the business afloat, they become more committed to the processes. SME leaders worldwide may consider these recommended strategies implemented from the data discovered in this study.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for positive change are that SME sustainability creates more employment opportunities, improving people's living standards in communities, community socio-economic wellbeing through corporate social responsibility, and environmental friendliness, known as net-zero. Community members may benefit from company-sponsored events: skill acquisition training, provision of basic amenities, and youth development programs. Lumpkin et al. (2018) noted that social change benefits society more than organizations. The research findings could help small business leaders employ community members trained through the empowerment programs, a CSR initiative. SME sustainability is an environmentally friendly operation showing concern and recognition to the community where it operates (Dhanda & Shrotryia, 2020; Montiel et al., 2020). Identifying the potential strategies that ensure sustainability could enable small business survival and benefits employees and families while providing longevity,

local employment, and stable incomes that can catalyze local economic growth and reduce the risk of failure.

### **Recommendations for Action**

This qualitative multiple case study explored SME leaders' strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The research findings include three significant themes and ten subthemes. The participants provided valuable insights into their experiences and how they blended the subthemes to become formidable strategies to sustain and grow their business profitably. The action recommendations include implementing strategic management, stakeholder management strategies, and business processes. SME leaders should develop strategies that direct business activities, support the allocation of resources to achieve key business objectives and decisions, and enhance performance to create organizational profitability, competitive advantage, and uniqueness in small and medium businesses to attain sustainability.

Furthermore, small business leaders are responsible for a positive work environment and all management activities (Williams & Aaron, 2018). Finally, I would recommend that small business leaders attend leadership and sustainability seminars annually to become knowledgeable about sustainability strategies, leadership styles, and the terminology, understanding which leadership styles and sustainability strategies are adopted globally or a combination that can enhance their continued sustenance of the business success. The findings of my study could help persuade new, existing, and those thinking about becoming business leaders to act for personal development.



After completing the study, each participant will receive a one-to-two-page summary of findings to support them as leaders. In addition, I plan to attend the National Society of Leadership Success conference to complete my final step, which is an executive leadership gathering, and share my study with classmates and colleagues. This study will be published in the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database for future use and review.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This qualitative multiple case study explored SME leaders' strategies to sustain their business beyond 5 years. The findings indicated that strategic management, application of business strategies, and strategic business processes are essential strategies to attain sustainability of small and medium businesses. The main limitation of this study was the geographic location and sample size. The study of one geographic area and a small sample size allows researchers to identify and recommend future research topics (Greener, 2018). This research study included three SME leaders from diverse industries in Rivers State, Nigeria. Future research should include a more significant geographic location, increased sample size, and a different conceptual framework and methodology.

There is extensive research on strategy. However, there is little research regarding SME leaders' strategies for sustaining their businesses beyond 5 years. A future study could focus on the impact of sustainability among small business leaders within the specific industry. Researchers can use quantitative or mixed-method research to identify strategies that advance small business success and sustainability beyond 5 years.

## Reflections

As I reflect on the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program at Walden University, it has been an exciting and challenging experience. The journey has been overwhelming, stressful, and was earlier frustrating. I wondered if I would complete the program, but I kept my faith. I recall being in my intensive residencies in Phoenix some years back, and one professor said, "I am in a success business, meaning she believes everybody in the school can succeed because she sees student success as her success" I was confident in that saying throughout the course and life now. But then, I took a break due to life happenings. I endured the dollar exchange rate surge, family issues, and other life issues during my educational career. With unwavering encouragement from my mentees in the Doctoral journey and support from family and friends, I returned to class at a higher dollar exchange rate and was determined to finish. My chair, Dr. Dooley, tremendously supported me at every stage of the journey, coupled with my classmates' team Dooley. This journey taught me how to become a critical writer, critical thinker, researcher, and scholar.

I began this doctoral program to achieve my goals and make my family proud. The experience has challenged me beyond measures and enabled me to grow professionally and personally. While I was confident that the path would be smooth because of my 30 years of experience in different leadership roles in the field, it was pretty challenging. My doctoral study has enabled me to understand and solve the challenges of SMEs' sustainability and the significance of strategies in all I do.

## **Conclusion**

Some SMEs leaders lack strategies to operate a business beyond 5 years effectively. This qualitative multiple case study explored strategies that SME leaders use to sustain business beyond 5 years. The processes used in the data collection included semiconstructed questions, member checking, methodological triangulated data, and journaling. In addition, I incorporated methodological triangulation for validation of the three main themes and subthemes. The conceptual framework for this study was based on the RBV theory by Wernerfelt (1984). The conclusions of this study offer insight into multiple strategies that SMEs employ to sustain their business. Three main themes and subthemes emerged: (a) strategic management, (b) application of business strategies, and (c) strategic business processes. SMEs leaders should evaluate their sustainability strategy for business survival and support operational sustainment.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

**Research question:** What sustainability strategies do SME leaders use to remain in business beyond 5 years?

What will I do	What will I say
<p>Upon receiving the Informed Consent Form back from participants, I will e-mail participants to obtain a scheduled time on Zoom to conduct for the interview.</p> <p>Once received - I will send out a meeting request for the agreed-upon date and time, including: The Zoom meeting link</p>	
<p>Make sure that I am in 15 minutes early for the Zoom meeting</p>	
<p>Once connected with the participant, I will begin with salutations, personal introductions, and an overview of the research topic.</p>	<p>(Participant Name) Thank you for participating in my study and agreeing to allow me to interview you today. My name is Olawe Tula, and I am a graduate student at Walden University conducting my doctoral study in partial fulfillment of the Doctor of Business Administration degree requirements, emphasizing leadership.</p> <p>This semistructured interview will last 30-60 minutes and include seven interview questions about your sustainability strategies to operate your businesses beyond 5 years.</p> <p>All information obtained is confidential. The answers received from your interview will help to understand how you and your counterparts apply sustainability strategies in your enterprises</p>
<p>Confirm eligible to participate in the study</p>	<p>I will ask the participants three criteria to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21 and above years Old</li> <li>• Willing to participate</li> <li>• A current Leader (</li> </ul>

	Director/Manager/Supervisor of the research site
State Date, Time, and Location of Interview	I will state the date, time, and location of the interview
Review Informed Consent and Confirm Agreement	I will supply participants with their signed informed consent forms. I will state to them that all information obtained is confidential. I will ask if there are any questions or concerns regarding this form or this process.
Permission to record and begin	Can I please have your consent to record this session? Any other questions or concerns before we begin?
During the Interview:	I will ask the seven interview questions and follow-up probing questions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch for non-verbal queues</li> <li>• Paraphrase as needed</li> <li>• Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What successful sustainability strategies did you use to establish and operate beyond 5 years?</li> <li>• What sustainability strategies did you implement to achieve sustainable growth and remained in business beyond 5 years?</li> <li>• What sustainability strategy did you implement to overcome critical challenges to remain in business beyond 5 years?</li> <li>• What sustainability strategy did you use to sustain profitability and remained in business beyond 5 years?</li> <li>• What sustainability strategy did you use to sustain staff recruitment and retention to remain in business beyond 5 years?</li> <li>• What sustainability strategies did you implement to achieve peace and business continuity with host communities to remain in business beyond 5 years?</li> <li>• What sustainability strategies did you use to sustain employee innovation and motivation to</li> </ul>

	remain in business beyond 5 years?
Follow up questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you measure strategy success in your enterprise growth, profitability, and performance?</li> <li>• How did you as an enterprise leader measure social performance, i.e., community stability and co-existence?</li> <li>• How did you measure the staff motivation and innovation to remain in business?</li> <li>• What is your staff turnover rate, i.e., How many staff or percentage of staff leave your business for better opportunities or self-development?</li> </ul>
End of the interview	I will thank the research participant for allowing me to interview them and participate in the study.
Schedule follow-up member-checking interview	I will remind participants that I will meet them in two weeks to verify the accuracy of the transcription. I will provide my synthesis in advance of our meeting for your review. Could you provide an email address so that I send it to you?
Before the Member Checking Meeting: 48 hours before the scheduled meeting, I e-mail participants the summary of their interview answers and confirm the meeting date and time.	Email to include: Good Morning (Participant Name), Thanks for participating in the interview on ____, where we discussed the seven interview questions. As promised, I have attached the synthesis of that meeting for your review. Please review and ensure that I have accurately synthesized your answers. I look forward to talking with you again on ____ to discuss. If there are errors, you will be able to make changes or corrections to your responses or clarify my interpretations at that time.
Introduce a follow-up interview and set the stage	(Participant Name) Thanks for talking with me today. As I stated at our previous meeting, I am allowing you to review my

	<p>interpretation of your interview answers before I include them in my study. Member-checking ensures that I have accurately represented your answers. You can modify or clarify your answers as you deem appropriate.</p>
<p>Share a copy of the synthesis for each question before the meeting.</p> <p>Review each question and synthesis with the participant and ask:          Did I miss anything?          Does this correctly represent your response?          Is there anything you would like to add?</p>	<p>What successful sustainability strategies did you use to establish and operate your business for over 5 years?          What sustainability strategy did you implement to achieve sustainable growth outcomes to remain in business beyond 5 years?          What sustainability strategy did you implement to overcome critical challenges to remain in business beyond 5 years in your business?          What sustainability strategy did you use to sustain profitability, growth, and performance and remained in business beyond 5 years?          What sustainability strategy did you use to sustain staff recruitment and retention to remain in business beyond 5 years?          What sustainability strategies did you implement to achieve peace and business continuity with host communities to remain in business beyond 5 years?          What sustainability strategies did you use to sustain employee innovation and motivation to remain in business beyond 5 years?</p>
<p>Wrap up the member-checking interview.</p>	<p>(Participant Name), thank you for your time today. It was a pleasure sharing and discussing my results with you. I will provide you with an update on my progress. I will send you a 1- to-2-page summary of the results.</p>